

CLANCY
OF THE
MOUNTED
POLICE



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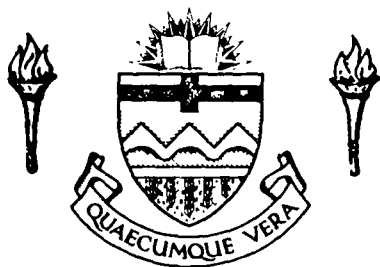
CLANCY OF
THE MOUNTED
POLICE



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CLANCY OF THE
MOUNTED POLICE

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THE WHITE HANDS OF JUSTICE
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WHERE THE AURORA FLAMES

CLANCY OF THE MOUNTED POLICE

BY
OTTWELL BINNS

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1924

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TO MY WIFE

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CLANCY OF THE MOUNTED POLICE

CHAPTER I

IN THE WOODS

EXCEPT for the occasional rustle of dry leaves as some small creature of the wilds moved cautiously on its quest, the night was marvellously still. There was no sigh of air in the tree tops, no ripple of water on the shore, beyond which, like a vast mirror, the lake gleamed in the cold November moonlight. An immense silence seemed to brood over the land, a silence of strange quality, almost a sentient thing, and one to set a weight of oppression on the human spirit.

Along the lake-side, forming a huge dark frame for the watery mirror, was the dense shadow of the primeval forest, broken only at one point by the red glow of a fire, built small and round after the Indian manner. By the fire on a fallen tree a man was seated, smoking contemplatively, his eyes resting abstractedly on a little inlet on which, since he had pitched his camp two hours ago, thin spurs of ice had formed. A crackling stick, breaking into sudden flame, destroyed the silence, and at the same time lit up the man's face and gleamed on the badges of his tunic collar. The flame spurted higher, showing the face to be lean and strong, and throwing its light on the pale khaki of the tunic, brought the badges into relief, revealing them to be

two black buffalo heads. In their turn the symbols proclaimed the man who wore them to be an unit of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, the great force which carries the law of the Dominion through all the North-West Territories from the Yukon to Hudson Bay, and from the Montana border to Herschel Island on the frozen rim of the Arctic Ocean.

For a moment the man's gaze was diverted from the inlet with its spikelets of ice to the crackling stick ; but as the stick was consumed and the miniature *jeu de jõe* ceased, his eyes once more sought the inlet which lay in the moonlight, and then he gave a little shiver.

"Winter's coming!" he muttered. "And——" He broke off sharply, a little startled by the sound of his own voice ; and then added in a subdued whisper :

"My God, how quiet it is!"

It *was* quiet—with the quietness of the outer places that seldom hear the voice of man, where the primeval silence is broken only by the feet of furtive beasts or the crash of falling trees before the howling storms. The man looked round, behind him into the deep shadow of the woods, before him at the lake's mirror cold and still with the ice gleaming in the moonlight, then he whispered once again.

"It's like something living, crouching back there in the darkness, and waiting to spring on one."

His whispered description of the silence of the North was not inapt. There is about it nothing of the Wordsworthian silence that is in the starry skies and the sleep that is among the lonely hills. It is a silence that men instinctively know to be inimical. The vast stillness broods threateningly, so that men becoming aware of it speak in whispers, as if afraid of letting loose that mysterious menace that is incarnate in the silence. Before it the spirit quails, reason totters, and

men pass through strange gates of horror to downright madness.

The man by the fire had seen men who had so passed, and knowing that the feeling of eeriness that was mounting within him must at all costs be checked he rose from his seat, and began to build up the fire : for a bright leaping fire with its crackle and flying sparks is a solitary man's comfort, helping to banish the intense feeling of loneliness which is so destructive of nerve. That done he re-seated himself on the fallen tree, charged his pipe and lit it, and then very resolutely refused to think of the great silence, of which nevertheless, in the background of his mind, he was all the time most acutely aware. His eyes sought the inlet with its spears of ice once more : and desiring even the thin comfort which the sound of his own voice afforded him, he spoke his thoughts whisperingly.

"I'll have to hurry. If I don't get that half-breed soon it will be a winter chase." He puffed contemptuously, then added, "And I don't want that !"

His mind followed the man whom he was pursuing. Was the half-breed making due north for the Arctic and the refuge afforded by the igloos of Esquimaux, or would he soon break from his bee-line and, making the traverse between this unnamed lake and the Mackenzie, swing back southward ? Either alternative was possible, whilst each was equally probable, for Jean Dubosc knew the land from end to end, as few men knew it ; and upon his choice of road depended the length of the chase.

He sat considering the matter for some time, deliberately striving to lose his consciousness of the brooding silence in an attempt to determine a matter that as he knew, but for some lucky chance, depended entirely upon Jean Dubosc's whim ; and knowing all the time that he was failing in his endeavours, that the silence

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was there at his elbow waiting to set its grip upon him. Presently he ceased to think about the half-breed. The menace of the silence once more made itself felt, sending a cold *aura* through his veins. He was no coward, no man who wore the buffalo-heads was ever that, but he was Irish, and the quick imaginativeness of his race was part of his heritage. He looked round uneasily into the darkness of the sombre forest, and again the chill *aura* swept through his veins, ending in a prickling of "goose-flesh" and a little shudder.

Then suddenly the infinite stillness of the night was shattered by a sound which brought him swiftly and silently to his feet, with an amazed look upon his face. He stood there in the attitude of a man listening intently, his eyes turned towards a large tree-crowned promontory jutting out into the lake, from which direction the sound had come. For a minute, two minutes, three, he stood there, rigid, almost as still as the trees which shadowed him; then from the promontory looking so dark and sombre under the cold moonlight came a sudden explosive bellow, which shivered anew the silence which had fallen on lake and forest.

"Uh! Uh! Uh! Er-r-yw-h! R-r-r-unh-r-n-h!"

No words can give any indication of the quality of the startling sound which he heard; but Corporal Clancy, versed in the cries of the wild, knew that it was the answer of the bull-moose to the cow's call, and scarcely had the grunting roar ceased to echo when there sounded another frightful bellow somewhere in the deep woods behind him. But there was a difference in the answering bellows, which he was quick to note; and which told him that the one came from a horn of birch-bark sounded by some hunter, whilst the other was the genuine cry of the lordliest beast of the northern world. As he divined what was happening he smiled.

"Some one moose-calling," he whispered to himself. "Now who——" He broke off, his mind furnishing the answer before the question was half uttered. "Jean Dubosc!"

It could be no one else, he thought; and a moment later, assured of the near presence of the quarry which he had followed so far, he was preparing to complete the chase. The menace of silence was utterly forgotten. The oppression of which his spirit had been conscious was swept away by a momentary excitement; but the next minute he was just the living instrument of the law, alert, cool, courageous.

Thrusting his pipe in his pocket, he reached for and examined his rifle, slipping off the safety-catch and assuring himself that there was a cartridge in the chamber, then he began to work his way along the lake-side in the direction of the promontory. Now the silence seemed banished from the land. Again and again sounded the mock bellow of the cow-moose, whilst the responsive trumpeting of the bull somewhere deep in the dark woods made an almost terrifying crescendo of sound. As he slid along the lake-side, well in the shadow of the trees, noticing the sounds carefully, Clancy knew that the bull-moose back there in the darkness was not merely answering the call of love, but was bellowing challenge and defiance to the rival who he suspected was hidden in the trees on the promontory; a suspicion which the unseen hunter deliberately fostered by occasionally answering with a roaring challenge.

Once, in an interval of the frightful trumpeting, the corporal stopped to listen. To his ears was borne the sound of some mighty body crashing beneath low hanging trees and through the undergrowth, some distance away on his left, and he guessed that the moose, usually so cautious, was making an almost

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bee-line towards the promontory. Versed in the ways of the wood creatures, he knew the possibilities of such a situation, and he moved cautiously, for the bull tearing through the woods with the force of a battering ram was not likely to be any respecter of persons; and an angry bull-moose is a formidable opponent. There was the further reason for caution that he suspected the hunter to be his own quarry, Jean Dubosc, and as the half-breed was a man of reckless disposition it would be as well to take him by surprise if that were at all possible. He was an old hunter, his work in the mounted police had taught him the necessity of quietness when moving on a hot trail, and he made practically no noise as he pushed forward on the edge of the shadowy woods, guided by occasional calls of the moose-horn. Presently he reached the promontory, and having worked his way across it, arrived at a place where the forest thinned, and where, lit by the bright moon, a grassy stretch ran down to the lake's frozen edge.

Just as he came in sight of it, he heard the simulated bellow of a cow from the border of the wood across the grass, and stared carefully into the shadows. After a little search he caught a glint of something in the broken moonlight under the trees, and a second later divined that it was the barrel of a rifle resting against one of the trunks, for by the side of it he vaguely discerned a human figure.

Convinced in his own mind that it was Dubosc who waited there, he crept forward, circling round until he was a few yards behind the wielder of the birch-bark trumpet. Then, as the hunter sent a challenging bellow to the great beast crashing through the woods, under cover of the sound, Clancy took a quick step forward, knocked aside the rifle resting against the trunk, and spoke sharply :

"My game, Dubosc! Put up your hands! The charge is——"

He got no further. A burst of feminine laughter broke on his words, and almost before he had realized his mistake there was a challenging bellow from across the grass, a crash of bushes, and a great moose burst into the open. Not seeing the rival he had expected, the huge animal stood there, gritting his teeth, grunting savagely, and stamping the earth with his terrible hoofs. Then apparently he caught sight of the two humans standing in the shadow of the trees, and with a fierce, coughing bellow he charged straight for them.

"A tree! Quick!" yelled Clancy as he brought his rifle to the shoulder and fired.

There was no time for fine sighting. He fired hastily, and then, conscious that the huntress was already swinging into a spruce tree, he slipped round a trunk, hastily ejected the spent shell, threw a live one into the chamber, and sighting carefully this time, fired again. The great beast, checked in mid-career, flung forward, rolled completely over and brought up at the foot of the spruce where the huntress had taken refuge. He staggered to his feet, threshed the spruce with his wide palmated horns, grunting in fierce rage, until Clancy's third shot brought him down not to rise again.

The corporal stepped into the open, and in the same instant a lithe figure dropped from the spruce and advanced to meet him.

"Now, sir," said a feminine voice indignantly, "will you tell me what you mean by interfering with my hunting?"

Struck by the quality of her voice, and still in the grip of his original amazement, Clancy was dumb, and stood there eyeing her in bewilderment as she halted before him, with the moonlight full upon her. As

his first glance told him she was young and rarely beautiful, with dark eyes that just now had in them a flash of indignation ; whilst the beaded leather tunic of native manufacture, extending a third of the way down the breeches which were its complement, revealed a lissom form just rounding to womanhood. As he did not instantly reply, the girl stamped her foot upon the grass.

" Why did you interfere ? The game was——"

Then Clancy found his tongue. " It was a mistake on my part," he said apologetically. " I could not see you very well, and I mistook you for some one else—for a dangerous criminal in fact."

The indignation in the dark eyes gave way to sudden dancing laughter.

" A dangerous criminal ! What a—a—compliment ? "

The corporal knew that he was being laughed at, and did not altogether relish the fact ; but he laughed with her, and continued his explanation. " I didn't know that there was any one else in the neighbourhood. The North isn't quite as crowded as Regent Street or Broadway, and I've been at Dubosc's heels for weeks."

" Dubosc ? Who——"

" The man whom I am trailing. A half-breed accused of murder."

" And you mistook me for a murderer ? Fie, sir ! And you a mounted policeman ! "

" Corporal Terence Clancy, at your service, miss."

" Corporal w—what ? "

As she asked the question there was a note of wonder in her voice, and an almost incredulous look upon her beautiful face. The corporal noticed both, but answered without remarking upon them.

" Terence Clancy—an Irish name, all the way ; but an honourable one for all that ! "

The girl stared at him curiously for a moment, then she said quickly : " Tell me, is Terence as much your family name as Clancy ? "

" Almost," he answered, looking at her wonderingly. " There has been a Terence Clancy in the family for at least two hundred years. The oldest son invariably takes that name."

" And you are the oldest son ? "

" I am the only son," answered the corporal. " And my father is dead."

The girl stared at him with curious eyes, then speaking more to herself than to him, she said in a half-whisper : " It is very odd ! "

" Don't see it," commented Clancy, thinking she referred to his name. " Terence was once good enough for a saint to carry, and a succession of Terences is as good as a string of Johns or Jameses, any day."

The girl gave a little laugh. " I wouldn't question if for worlds. But I was thinking of something quite different."

" What ? " demanded the corporal promptly.

" Oh—er—I was thinking how odd it is that we should meet like this ! "

Terence Clancy marked the momentary hesitation and wondered if that were indeed what the girl was thinking, but he put the question aside and laughed. " It is certainly a little unusual. But queer things do happen when you get twelve hundred miles from railroad ! I am sorry I spoilt your sport, though."

" So am I ! " answered the girl with a rueful laugh.

" Having called him, I wanted to kill that moose all by my little self. Father said I mustn't try ; and Montana Joe and Anton the guides both said it was dangerous, so I was determined to do it."

Terence Clancy laughed again, this time at the wilfulness of voice and face, and then offered comment.

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"Moose-calling certainly has its risks ! "

"But I could have made the kill all right," said the girl. "I am a good shot."

"I believe you could," answered the corporal admiringly.

"But you robbed me of the chance," replied the girl reproachfully ; "and now goodness knows if I shall ever get another, the season being so late. I had to steal away from the camp to get this one ; and as like as not I shall have to promise not to try again."

"I am sorry I interrupted——"

"Perhaps it is as well you did," said the girl thoughtfully. "I think I must take you to our camp to see my father—if you will come."

"Delighted, of course," answered Clancy. "Where is the camp ? "

"Round the next point there ! I have a canoe by those bushes. If you are ready we will go at once. I think my father will be interested to meet you. And we can send Joe and Anton to secure the meat of the kill you robbed me of."

She turned and, walking to the place where her rifle lay in the grass, retrieved it, and then returning, led the way to the lake-side and to the canoe. As they reached it, Clancy spoke again.

"Your father—you have not told me his name ? "

"Nor my own !" laughed the girl. "Well, my father is John B. Elkington, of New York, and I am Mollie, his only daughter and thorn in the flesh." She stopped and flashed a searching glance at him. "I suppose you have not heard the name before ? "

"Mollie or Elkington ? " asked Clancy half-banteringly.

"Oh, Elkington, of course ! "

"No ! " answered the corporal, wondering if the

name had some more than ordinary significance since the girl seemed so earnest. "I can't say that I have."

"Such is Wall Street fame!" laughed the girl, a look of relief on her face. "In New York John B. Elkington is a name of might; up here"—she waved her hand in a half-circle—"I suppose the names of Montana Joe or Anton are of greater weight."

"It is possible," answered Clancy laughingly, "though as Joe and Anton are likewise strangers to me, I will not go further than that. You have two paddles, I see. Shall I take the stern?"

"Yes, do please."

A minute later they were afloat; and as Terence Clancy bent to the paddle, he wondered what manner of man John B. Elkington might be, and why the girl should have been so anxious to know if he were acquainted with the name. But presently he forgot his wonder, and, with his eyes fixed on the lissom figure in front of him, working rhythmically at the paddles as if born to it, lost himself in growing admiration.

CHAPTER II

AN OFFER REFUSED

IN silence they paddled up the moonlit lake, leaving behind them a silvery wake, and as they rounded a bold bluff jutting out into the water, came suddenly on a big camp-fire set on the shore of a bay; beside which stood two fair-sized tents. In the circle of the firelight two men were busy—the one at a cooking pot, the other mending a torn shirt; whilst a third man, sitting a little apart, was apparently studying a piece of parchment spread out upon his knees. As the couple in the canoe disembarked the

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girl gave a laughing hail, and all three of the men looked quickly up. The man with the parchment folded it swiftly, and thrusting it in his pocket as he rose, began to walk towards them. Clancy guessed instantly that he was John B. Elkington; for the other two men were of far rougher texture, whilst this man was obviously a man of consequence. As he approached, apparently quite oblivious of his daughter's companion, he asked tersely, "Mollie, where have you been?"

"Moose-calling," answered the girl with a little laugh, "and I have brought back with me the man who shot the moose."

"Mollie——" There was a note of protest in John B. Elkington's voice, and it was clear to Clancy that the girl was very near receiving a sharp reprimand. Possibly she anticipated it, for with some adroitness she turned it aside.

"You are very rude, father! You do not ask this Nimrod's name. Permit me," she continued, turning towards Clancy, "Corporal Terence Clancy of the Mounted Police. Mr. Elkington—my father."

"How do you do, Mr. Elkington," said Clancy cheerfully, holding out his hand.

For just a moment Mr. Elkington hesitated, a startled look in his eyes as he stared at the corporal, then his hand shot out to meet the policeman's. "Pleased to meet you, corporal, though the pleasure is an unexpected one."

Clancy laughed. "I daresay," he answered. "Trails up here are apt to be lonely ones."

"Very lonely, for a man who has lived his life in cities," replied Mr. Elkington. "But sit down, and smoke a cigar."

"A cigar! With pleasure. I haven't seen one for seven months."

"So long?" Mr. Elkington laughed. "Have you been so long on the trail?"

"Yes! I'm after a criminal half-breed, and just now I mistook your daughter for him."

"Very complimentary of him, wasn't it, dad?"

"Very!" laughed her father. "But I'm grateful to Corporal Clancy for bringing you back——"

"He didn't," interrupted the girl. "I brought him, feeling sure that you would like to meet him."

There was something in her tones, a little note of significance, an enigmatic quality, that arrested Clancy's attention, since he could not account for it; and looking up quickly, he caught John B. Elkington's eyes fixed upon him in questioning gaze.

"Yes," said the girl's father slowly. "I am very glad to make the acquaintance." He laughed a little as he held out his cigar-case. "Let us cement the acquaintance, corporal."

"With smoke?" mocked the girl.

"There are worse things than smoke, Miss Elkington," laughed Clancy, as he took the proffered cigar.

He stooped, plucked a small brand from the fire and lighting his cigar, inhaled luxuriantly; very conscious all the time of the keen questioning gaze with which his host still regarded him, a gaze of more than ordinary curiosity, which he was puzzled to account for. There was a moment's rather embarrassed silence, which was broken by the girl.

"Don't you think, father, that Anton and Joe might fetch in the meat? It is true that the moose fell to Corporal Clancy's rifle, but I called it and——"

"There'll be enough for all of us, I fancy," laughed Mr. Elkington; "but if you will tell Joe where it lies he and Anton can take the canoe——"

The girl nodded and went to one of the men to give the necessary directions, and presently the two men

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departed. As the canoe glided away, Elkington looked at his guest.

"I am interested in your name, corporal. I seem to have heard it before. Have you been up here very long?"

"Thirty-four months," answered Clancy promptly. "I left Ireland three years ago, but spent a few weeks in New York."

Mr. Elkington shook his head. It is further back than that. It must be at least ten years ago that I heard the name for the first time.

The corporal moved sharply, and shot a quick glance at his host. "That is very possible," he said. "My father was up here in the '98 gold rush, and I bear his name."

"And title?" asked his host quickly. "There was a title—if I remember rightly?"

"Yes," answered the corporal quietly. "There was a title, and, unfortunately, to-day I have the right to wear it, though I do not do so. My father was Sir Terence Clancy."

"He is dead, then?"

"Presumably! As I said, he was one of the crowd who poured into Klondyke in '98, and like many others he never came out."

"And you heard nothing of him?" As he watched the other and asked the question, there was an almost anxious note in Mr. Elkington's voice, and if Clancy had happened to look round he would have seen that the girl was leaning forward with a breathless look on her face.

"A little," answered the corporal. "I was a boy at school and my father wrote to me. Two or three letters reached me, one of them at least two years after it was written. In that one he told me that he and his partner had left the general ruck of gold-

seekers and had gone farther North, where they had made a great strike. He said that as soon as possible he and his partner were going south to register the claim and to get some necessary machinery, for which he would have to mortgage what was left of the Clancy estates, but that the prospect of that did not worry him, since in twelve months he would be a millionaire. That was the last word I ever had from him, the last I have ever heard of him."

For a moment a sombre look came on the corporal's face; and he sat quite still staring at the fire until his host's voice broke the silence."

"What do you think became of him, corporal?"

At the question a sudden fierce light shot in Clancy's blue eyes. "I think that he may have been murdered. He had a partner, as I said, and the partner may have desired all the spoils, and——"

"There is another possibility," interrupted his host. "The two of them may have been lost together. In these wild woods and unchartered rivers many men were so lost; and there were hostile Indians, and the scum of the mining camps, who——"

"No!" broke in Clancy, "I feel it in my bones that it was not so. My father's partner was not to be trusted. My father hinted at that in his last letter."

"What did he say?" asked his host quickly.

"He wrote that the man Benedict seemed to be very odd in his manner. That once he had awakened to find him sitting outside the tent, pistol in hand, as if he were contemplating some act of violence; and that it was his own intention to get possession of all the arms and drop them in the river with the exception of a single Winchester, which he proposed to carry himself."

"Benedict. Did you say the partner was called Benedict?"

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"Yes!"

"There was no other name?"

"None."

For a long minute there was silence, then Elkington spoke again. "It is a story with tragic possibilities, but I suppose your father's end will always remain a mystery, like the end of so many men who disappeared on the Northern trails in that tragic year and the year that followed it."

"I don't intend it to remain a mystery," said Clancy, a sudden heat in his voice. "If that man Benedict is above ground, I will find him and make him tell me the truth. That is why I am up here in the North, that is why I joined the Mounted Police. The work takes one on long trails and into strange places, and brings one into touch with doubtful and desperate characters. Some day I shall stumble on a clue, hear a word that will set me on the track of this Benedict, maybe run right into the fellow himself; for if he has interests up here, he will no doubt visit them sometimes. I will find him, if he is above ground."

"And when you find him—if you ever do?"

Clancy fingered his badges and gave a sudden harsh laugh. "I am a policeman; and a crime is none the less a crime because it is ten years old. Somewhere there's a rope being woven for——" He broke off, and then added apologetically, "You must forgive me talking like this. I can't help it. I am naturally hot-blooded, and my father was my hero, my saint—everything that an adventurous father could be to an adventure-loving boy."

Again there was silence, then Elkington said thoughtfully, "You seem to me to be following a forlorn hope. The North is so big, and ten years is a long time. The men who knew Sir Terence Clancy will have left the

country or have passed out on the longest trail of all. You are young, and it is foolish to waste your life on so vague a quest. No! don't interrupt, I am speaking plainly; because—well, for a very good reason! There are better and more profitable things than the Mounted Police for a man of your upbringing."

"I don't know about that!" broke in Clancy. "It is a man's life."

"Yes! Granted! But it is poorly paid, I imagine!"

"One dollar twenty-five cents a day for me," said Clancy with a laugh.

"Exactly! Less than a Dago's wage. And I am paying those two fellows who are with me five dollars a day, with a bonus at the end of the trip."

"But there's the honour of the service, and possibilities of promotion. There's no bar between a simple trooper and the commissionership!"

"Every man with the Marshal's baton in his knapsack! The old story!" The American laughed. "No bar, you say. No! but the deuce of a long trail between, and I don't suppose there are two men in the force who will follow that trail to the end."

"I mean to be one of them," said Clancy, flushing at his own boast.

Elkington nodded. "I should be the same if I wore those buffalo badges, and of course you've things that will help—education, a family name——"

"And my own right arm," laughed the corporal; "besides, there's that quest of mine for a spur."

"A spur—yes! But pricking you on to follow a shadow. You know nothing, whatever you may suspect. That man—er—Benedict, may have gone out with your father. You must know that men died like flies on the old gold-trails. I remember

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reading that at Tagish the men of your force took the names of all that passed and numbered the boats, so that they might be in a position to give information to the relatives of those who failed to get through. That was when they were going in ; but once they were in and up on the far trails beyond the police-posts the registering business had to be left to the Recording Angel ; and, if I know anything, in that first two years he'd plenty of work on his hands. Nobody really knows what happened to those fellows who passed and never returned. They starved, they drowned, were bogged or frozen ; or drifting to wild places were killed with bone-tipped arrows or salmon spears. Just think of that ghastly Edmonton trail ! But you know—you must have heard the mad tales——”

He broke off, and half turning looked towards the North. “Clancy, you'll never hit the truth. This country is full of mysteries, and it'll hold them inviolate till the crack of doom. Give up chasing the shadow of vengeance, and join forces with me. I'll make you a rich man. I've taken a fancy to you ; and should be glad to take you in as a partner. I don't really trust these two fellows I've got, though they were the best I could get at the Landing, when I started. But with you to back me——” Again he checked himself. “What do you say, Clancy ? Will you come ? ”

To Terence Clancy it was clear that the man was very much in earnest ; and he found himself wondering why he should so strongly urge desistance from his quest, and acceptance of what sounded a very generous offer. He was a little puzzled, and made no haste to commit himself ; and apparently impatient at the slight delay, Elkington spoke again.

“You will come, Clancy ? You will come ? ”

At that moment the corporal met the girl's eyes.

There was a silent appeal to him to agree written there and it moved him more than he would have cared to own. Nevertheless he shook his head.

"No! It is very good of you, Mr. Elkington; but you see at this moment I am on duty. I've got to get Dubosc. I should not be playing the game if I threw up the job just now, and it may take some time yet to bring it to a finish. Also I enlisted for five years and I propose to see the period through."

A look of disappointment came on the American's face, whilst his daughter broke in:

"But, Corporal Clancy——"

She checked her protest, as if suddenly convinced of the hopelessness of it; and Clancy smiled. "I am grateful for the offer, of course. Please don't think I do not appreciate it, but for the present I am wedded to this service."

"And to the idea of vengeance for your father's death?" asked Elkington quickly.

"Say rather to the idea of securing justice," replied the corporal.

"Then there's no more to be said," was the older man's reply. "Try another cigar!"

The corporal took the cigar, and as the conversation drifted into other channels, presently Clancy asked a question.

"Are you going to winter up here, Mr. Elkington?"

"Sure!" was the reply.

"And Miss Elkington, is she going to——"

"More sure!" broke in the girl laughingly, "I wouldn't be deprived of the opportunity for worlds. For two years I've been making myself fit, camping in the Adirondacks, learning cooking, practising with snow-shoes, and I'm not going to be denied the experience. Dad tried to leave me behind with the factor's wife at Fort Malsun, but I wouldn't be left."

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Clancy smiled as he marked the look of determination on her beautiful face, then he grew a little grave. "I don't know where you're going, of course, but if you're crosing the Circle——"

"We are!" interrupted Elkington.

"Then I'm afraid Miss Elkington is in for a dreary time. The Northland is no fun in winter and the cold is bitter as death——"

"Pooh!" laughed the girl. "You can't scare me by telling me I'm going to freeze my nose."

"I hope you won't do anything so unfortunate!" Clancy laughed back; and as he looked at the beautiful face with its firm little chin, a glow of admiration came into his eyes.

He remained there talking for some little time, then remembering that in the morning he must make an early start, he made his farewells, and started to walk to his camp through the woods. As he stumbled on his way, his mind was busy with this chance meeting in the wilderness and with the offer that the American had made him. Elkington had given no details, nor had he asked for any; but as he reflected on the matter, he could not help wondering what the journey into the North was concerned with, and why the American should have been so urgent for him to accompany him. Was it merely because he could not completely trust his two guides, or was there some more intimate and personal reason. He was still considering the problem when the sound of voices reached him from the direction of the lake.

"I tell you dat was zee paper. He read to be vaire sure of zee ways, den he look at zee map!"

"Well, what of that, you chump?" came the answering voice, which he recognized as belonging to the man Montana Joe. "He takes us along with him, don't he?"

"Oui! Oui! But eet is better, mooch better if we go alone, an——"

"I don't agree with you, Anton. Ever hear of the monkey what pulled the nuts out of the fire? It was very creditable of it: but when it's a case of burning yo'r fingers, somebody else than me is going to star as the monkey." The speaker laughed noisily, and then whilst Clancy stood thinking over the words which he had heard, the man spoke again. "Just lift them haunches into the canoe, and I'll bring along the tit-bits. The rest'll do for the lynxes and wolves."

There was a sound of movement, a French oath ripped as a man stumbled, and whilst the corporal still stood in the shadow of the trees there reached him the soft plunk! plunk! of paddles. Stepping into the open he stood looking after the canoe now gliding up the moonlit lake. There was a very thoughtful look in his eyes. He remembered what Elkington had said about his lack of trust in his guides; and the fragment of conversation which he had just overheard seemed to give the American's distrust a certain significance that was not to be ignored, even though he did not quite understand the bearing of it. Standing there, he recalled the parchment which he had seen in Elkington's hand on his arrival at the camp, and remembered how on his own advent the American had hastily folded it and put it away. Was that the paper to which the man Anton had referred? It seemed likely; and the other guide's words appeared to indicate that it referred to some valuable secret, though the nature of it he could only guess. That the two men out there in the canoe were a pair of rascals he was convinced; and he stood watching them for a little while half inclined to turn back and give their employer warning. Then he decided that there was no need for immediate action. Morning would do for

that ; and when he struck camp for the day's start it would be an easy thing to paddle up to the other camp and have a word with Mr. Elkington, and if necessary with the two guides also.

So thinking, he resumed his way towards his own camp, and when he arrived there, made up his fire, seated himself and gave himself up to reverie. Staring into the fire, he visioned the beautiful face of Mollie Elkington and was conscious of a certain quickening of his heart as he recalled her wilful, dancing eyes. The vision was pleasant enough for a lonely man to dwell upon ; and it was some time before he moved or lifted his eyes from the fire. When he did so, it was to find the moon obscured by a drifting cloud, and the lake in shadow. He looked at the darkened water carelessly, let his eyes rove round the immense three-quarter circle of darkness, and then suddenly leapt to his feet, an alert, eager look upon his face. Away across the shadowed bosom of the lake he saw a glowing point that experience told him was a camp-fire. It was miles away, but he had no doubt whatever that that glowing point indicated a human presence or presences. Who could it be ? Wandering Indians, a trapper moving to his winter location in the wilderness or—Jean Dubosc ?

He inclined to the latter belief, and after a little consideration he determined to put his faith to the test, and if he had guessed rightly, steal on his long-sought quarry in the silent hours when he would be asleep. Forgetting for the moment his intention to warn Elkington, he struck camp, launched his canoe and paddled out on the lake, making a straight line for the wilderness camp-fire, indicated by that glowing point of light.

CHAPTER III

HANDS UP

THE moon had set, and except for the faint light of stars, the world was in darkness, when Corporal Clancy drew up his canoe four hundred yards or so away from the dying glow of the camp-fire which had lured him on his nocturnal journey. As he stepped ashore he looked along the lake-side, but could see nothing except the faint radiance of the expiring fire ; and for a moment he stood wondering whether the unknown camper was indeed Jean Dubosc or not. As he peered into the shadows which gathered thickly along the shore, he waited, quite motionless, listening. No sound of movement came from the camp, and after a few minutes he began to move in the direction of the fire, exercising infinite caution to avoid making a noise.

A hundred yards or so away he halted, and again stood listening and staring into the shadows of which the dying fire was the centre. He could see nothing, and no sound of any movement came through the silence. He knew that in all probability Jean Dubosc was asleep ; but he had in mind the possibility that the half-breed might have seen the camp-fire down the lake, and even have watched his own progress across the water, so he took no risks, lest Dubosc, lying low, might be waiting for him, hoping to take him at a disadvantage. After a minute or two's consideration he turned from the shore, and slipped into the denser shadow of the thick pinewood which lined it. The half-breed, he reasoned, if he were expecting his advent, would look for him to come from the water, and not from the wood behind the camp ; and if he could creep near enough, he would be able to

see whether Dubosc was waiting for him or not, and would be able to act accordingly.

The thick carpet of pine-needles deadened the slight sound of his footsteps, and though it was difficult moving among the trees in the darkness, after a little time he reached a point where he had a clear view of the silent camp. The fire, fading now to white ash, still sent forth a faint glow, and by the dim radiance, he made out a man's form, wrapped in a blanket, lying in the shelter of a tree. It was impossible to see the man's face, and so to learn for certain whether the sleeper was the half-breed or not ; and there was nothing for it but to move nearer. Slipping his pistol from his holster, he stepped into the open, and with his eyes on the sleeper, crept forward. He had taken no more than half a dozen cautious steps, when he set his foot on something which, slipping away, rattled noisily against something else, breaking the silence with a sudden clamour. He guessed instantly that he had stepped into the middle of the camp utensils, which the sleeper had left lying about, carelessly ; and as the man, awakened by the din, sat suddenly bolt upright, Clancy leaped forward. He could not see the man's face, but he took the same chance that he had taken once before that night.

"Hands up ! Jean Dubosc, in the name of——"

He got no further. The man on the ground sprang up with amazing agility, and as he did so flung forward the heavy blanket. It caught Clancy in the face, and before he could recover from this unexpected move his assailant was on him, gripping him in both arms. Clancy swung his right hand clear. He still held the pistol, and it would have been perfectly easy for him to have used it ; but it is the tradition of the Mounted Police to use their arms only in the last resource, and the corporal was personally averse to using his pistol

in the situation in which he found himself. With a laugh he dropped the weapon, and grappled his opponent, whom he did not doubt was the half-breed. To and fro they struggled, each trying to throw the other, and neither succeeding.

In their desperate wrestle they trampled through the fire, and a smell of singed leather poisoned the air, of which, however, neither of them was aware. Panting, gasping, locked in the desperate embrace, they reeled down the slight slope to the edge of the lake, and it was only at the last moment that Clancy made the discovery that they had reached that point, and that the half-breed was trying to throw him in the water. With a desperate effort to recover himself, the corporal swung the half-breed half-way round, but lost his footing as he did so, and then toppled over towards the water, taking his opponent with him.

The fall was not a long one, and was broken by the deep water into which they dropped. They came up close to the bank, still locked in each other's arms, the half-breed gasping and spluttering. Clancy, except that he was a little winded, was very much himself. As he took a long breath, he caught sight of the bank behind his antagonist. It looked like rock, and the chance was worth trying. Suddenly he released his hold, and as they began to sink again, his opponent, clinging to him desperately, spoke for the first time:

"Sacré! No. Ah not swim. Ah——"

The corporal made a great effort. Kicking his legs to keep himself from going under, he suddenly drove the other's head against the rocky bank. In an instant the arms about him slackened their desperate grasp, and he felt the man slipping from him into the deep water. With a quick grab he caught the fellow's clothing, and clinging with one hand to a moss-grown projection of rock and treading water whilst he

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recovered his breath, held his prisoner's head clear of the water. Then, after a little time, he turned the unconscious man face upward, and himself swimming on his back, towed him until he reached a place, but a few yards farther on, where it was possible to land. When they were safely on the bank, he stood for a full minute breathing heavily ; and then stooping and taking the other under the armpits he dragged him back to the camp. There, to guard himself against surprise, he carefully handcuffed the unconscious man, and that done, from a little pile of dry wood which the owner of the camp had gathered, made up the fire. He waited until the dry wood crackled into flame, and by the light thus afforded he looked into the face of the unconscious man. A hideous scar down the right cheek gave him the certain information that he sought.

"Dubosc ! " he said, a light of triumph gleaming in his eyes.

In that same moment his prisoner sighed, grunted and then opened his eyes. Half a minute later he heaved himself up, whilst an oath slipped from his snarling lips :

"Mordieu ! "

A comical look of wonder came on his brutal face as he became aware of the handcuffs on his wrists, and an instant later he demanded truculently : " What for you do dat ? "

" Because you've got to answer for the killing of that Indian girl at Fond-du-Lac," answered the corporal tersely.

" Ah not keel no girl," replied Dubosc sullenly. " So you tak' dese dam' tings off, or par Dieu, Ah mak' you pay."

Clancy shook his head. " I think not, Jean. You're too big and I fancy a little too desperate to let run

round loose. You'll have to go down to the police-post and be passed on to Edmonton to stand your trial. If you are innocent, which I doubt, you'll have nothing to fear."

"An' eef dey say Ah keel dat girl?"

"Then they'll hang you as high as Haman!"

"Ah not know heem!" said the half-breed sullenly.

"An' Ah not go to Edmonton, *non*! Ah go up dere." He jerked his head northward as he spoke. "Ah got business up dat way, an' in t'ree months Ah be a vaire rich mans. Ah gif you one t'ousand dollaires——"

Clancy laughed suddenly. "No go, Jean. If you had ten thousand dollars to shove in my fist right away it would make no difference. You'll have to go to the post."

"You t'ink Ah not pay——"

"No! That's not it at all. Though how you propose to pay a thousand dollars when you're deep in the Company's debt——"

"Ah tell you dat in t'ree months Ah vaire rich mans wit' heaps of dollaires, Ah find gold mine, Ah mak' you partner——"

"No, you won't, Jean," broke in the corporal. "You'll go with me to the post to answer for the killing of Wagush, so there's an end of the discussion."

"Ah not go!" asserted the half-breed savagely. "You see, an' by-an'-by you wish you haf my offer accept."

"That remains to be seen," said Clancy lightly, "and it's no use discussing it now. I'm tired. I've paddled miles to-night to get you, and I want to sleep; so as you're so set against going down to the post, I shall tie you up for safety."

Hunting around, he found among the half-breed's possessions a long strip of hide which the owner had used for making fast his dunnage, and with this he

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secured Dubosc's legs, slipping the end for greater security round a tree. That done, he built up the fire, threw the half-breed's heavy blanket over him, and himself went off down the lakeside to bring in his own canoe and possessions. When he returned, he stripped and changed into dry clothing, and then rolling himself in his blanket, tried to sleep.

But for a long time slumber eluded him. Tired though he was, there was a glow in his brain that kept him awake, and which arose from the sense of satisfaction at a task successfully accomplished. For many weeks, with but the faintest clues to guide him, he had followed Dubosc along the innumerable and intricate waterways of the North ; never quite sure that the elusive man ahead of him was the man whom he sought ; but divining it from the numerous twists and turns that the course had taken in the first few weeks. Now the stern chase through a solitary land was over, and there remained but to get his prisoner back to the police-post, whence others would take him down to Edmonton for trial. Caution and alertness would secure that end without any particular difficulty, and the return journey, avoiding the doublings and windings of the outward course, would be made in a third of the time.

"We shall be back before the freeze-up!" he murmured aloud, and with that thought in his mind fell asleep.

When he awoke it was broad daylight, and as he arose and stretched himself, he saw that the half-breed had kicked away his blanket, and was sitting on the ground with his back to the tree to which the hide rope was fastened.

"Morning, Jean!" he said, as he turned to his prisoner. "Would you like a pipe?"

Dubosc made no response to either the greeting or

the question. In his sullen eyes as he looked at his captor there flamed a sudden light of wonder. He stared at Clancy as at a man returned from the dead ; and as he gazed his brutal face was transformed with amazement. Suddenly he burst out :

“ Mon Dieu ! Eet ees Sir Clancy ! ”

As he caught the words, on Clancy's face in turn there came a look of astonishment. There were not three men in the regiment who knew of his right to a title ; and excepting the two people who yesterday had guessed it, he was prepared to swear that there was not another individual in the Territories who could be aware of the fact. Yet here was this half-breed——

“ Tiens ! But eet cannot be ! ” Dubosc cried incredulously. “ Sir Clancy he was lost in zee woods so long ago. Him dead for certainment—— ”

“ What's that you say ? ” broke in Clancy sharply, his grey eyes alight with sudden excitement.

“ Ah say Sir Clancy he ees lost dese ten years, dat you can not be heem, an' yet—— ”

“ You are talking of my father,” interrupted the corporal hoarsely. “ My father who went up North with his partner in '98 and never came back. What do you know about him, Dubosc ? Tell me.”

“ So dat ees eet ! ” The wonder died from the half-breed's eyes, and his face became quite suddenly the usual brutal mask. “ Ah might hav' guess. Tiens ! Of a certainment you are Sir Clancy's son, so like dat for one leetle moment Ah tink dat you be heemself come back from zee dead.”

“ Tell me what you know about him, Dubosc. Anything, everything that you know, and I will do my best to make things easy for you.”

“ An' eet will be leetle dat you can do dat way, par Dieu ! eef you take me to be hang by ze neck at Edmonton ! ”

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"I can't help that, Jean. I've got to take you down to the post; that's duty, as you know very well. But I'll give you an easy journey, and when you go for trial, I will see that you have a good lawyer to defend you——"

"A lawyer!" The half-breed laughed hoarsely. "Tiens! You tink dat talk will save my neck from zee rope, when Ah hav' keel Wagush! Non! non!" A look of cunning came on the brutal face, then with the naïveté of a child, the half-breed said, "You loose my hands, an' giv' me zee canoe, an' Ah tell you alls!"

"I can't do that, Jean, and you know it. I would if I could, but it is quite impossible, and outside any bargaining. You tell me about my father and I swear I'll do my best to make things easy for you, and if you can get off with your life, I'll see you do."

"But den Ah go to Stonee Montaigne!" objected the half-breed.

"What of that? Ten years of the Penitentiary at Stone Mountain will be nothing to three minutes at the end of a rope, Jean. You know it. The rope's the ultimate end of all, and ten years, if you get that much, will pass, and after—after there's the trap-line, and the forest cabin and the clean North that you can come back to. And I'll see that when you come out that you have a grub-stake, enough to carry you through the first year, I swear it by all the saints."

In his heart Clancy knew that he was promising things that he would never have to perform. The evidence against Dubosc, quite apart from the confession that he had just made to himself, was too strong for any hope of escaping the gallows to be entertained; but he did not allow that conviction to appear. He spoke passionately, earnestly, seeking to move the half-breed's sullen spirit to friendliness, and as he finished speaking, he saw a change come on the brutal

face, whilst the sombre eyes looked at him calculatingly.

"Tell me, m'sieu, why you so want to know?"

"Because I suspect foul play. I know my father had a partner. I know that together they made a great strike of gold; and that my father was coming out to arrange for machinery when he disappeared. I suspect that his partner may have had something to do with his disappearance and I want to find him, and if he was guilty of my father's death to bring him to judgment."

"Tiens!" cried Dubosc in wonder. "After dose ten years!"

"Ten years! What do they matter?"

"Not'ings, not'ings at all!" said the half-breed, a smile of cunning on his hard face. Then he said suddenly: "M'sieu, dere is anoder camp down zee lac."

He lifted his manacled hands as he spoke to point to a place where a thin column of white smoke showed against the dark green of the pines.

"Yes," said Clancy impatiently. "The camp of an American gentleman from New York. I was there last night before I saw your fire, and——"

"You were dere las' night? Parbleu! But dat ees a strange t'ing!"

"Why is it strange? And what has it to do with the thing we are talking about?"

"You ask dat?" The half-breed gave a laugh. "Listen, m'sieu, an' Ah will tell you what Ah know, an' you weel get me dat lawyer to send me to Stonee Montaigne instead of to zee gallows. You do dat, an' Ah tell you of Sir Clancy."

"I swear by all the saints I will keep the promise, Jean." Clancy was too excited and too eager to hear what the half-breed had to tell him to give any heed to the flicker of cunning that came into the dark eyes,

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and he leaned forward hopefully as Dubosc began to speak.

"Eet ees a bargain, m'sieu! We shake zee hand upon it."

Instantly Clancy thrust his hands to the manacled ones of his prisoner, and they shook in clumsy fashion, after which the half-breed began to speak.

"Eet ees not much dat Ah can you tell; but eet ees enough, Ah tink! Ah know Sir Clancy when he come into zee North; an' Ah hear of zee man who ees his friend, an' with whom he ees when he mak' zee great strike. Dey go aways toget'er, up dere into zee shadow of zee Circle, an' dey are always a long, long taime, den dey are seen coming back toget'er; an' dey are so vaire secret dat men guess dat dey hav' found gold. Oder men dey go on zee back-trail hoping dat dey will zee gold find, but dey do not; an' den one day into zee camp at Lone Moose dere comes Sir Clancy's partner; an' he ees alone, an' near to death for lack of food. Heem say dat Sir Clancy ees lost in zee great woods an' unless he hav' found game ees dead; but he ees secret, vaire secret about zee gold, you understand, an' dere are men who t'ink dat he hav' Sir Clancy keeled; but dey are eager for zee gold, an' dey not trouble mooch about dat, an' by-an'-by he go away, an' dere be those who heem follow, t'inking he will dem lead on zee trail of zee gold, but Ah t'ink heem too cunning an' wise to do dat. *Oui!* Ah vaire sure of dat; but what happen after Ah not know."

"But the name—you know that, Jean? The man's name, tell me?"

"*Oui, m'sieu!*" As he spoke Dubosc's eyes lifted from the corporal's face and rested on the distant column of smoke, then he flashed a glance of triumph at Clancy, as if conscious of bringing his narrative to

a stupendous climax. "*Oui, m'sieu*," he repeated softly. "Men call heem Yankee Ben; but his name eet is not Ben. Non! eet ees zee name of a saint, eet ees Benedict—Benedict Elkington!"

"Elkington!" As he echoed the name, a startled look came on the corporal's face. Instinctively he turned his eyes towards that white column against the sombre pines. "God in heaven!" he whispered hoarsely to himself. "It can't be true."

"But eet ees zee truth dat Ah haf you tell," asserted the half-breed in answer to the whisper. "Eet ees truth as a saint might speak eet."

And as he made the assertion the light of triumph gleamed again in his sullen eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A SURPRISE IN THE NIGHT

TERENCE CLANCY, if he heard them, took no notice of Dubosc's last words. For long minutes he stood still like a stone, looking across the lake, his face indexing terrific emotions. Through his mind in galloping review passed the events of the previous night. He recalled the note of surprise in Mollie Elkington's voice when she had heard his name, and the almost incredulous look upon her face. He remembered her curious question about his Christian name, and her half-whispered comment "It is very odd!" and her further remark about the oddness of their meeting. Steadily his mind recalled the things which at the time had seemed to him to be a little strange, her strong curiosity as to his familiarity with the name of Elkington, her father's startled look on their introduction, the note of significance that had been in the girl's voice and to which he had had no

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clue, the curious questioning gaze with which the American had regarded him, and all the details of the conversation that had followed.

The points of significance in that conversation now stood out like mountain peaks—Elkington's manifest knowledge of Clancy senior, his probing into his own purpose, and the attempt to dissuade him from following it, the offer of a partnership in a venture that had not been clearly defined: and as he thought of these things, in the light of Dubosc's statement, the meaning of them burned in his brain. Standing there staring across the grey lake, he momentarily forgot the half-breed's presence; and as a vision of Mollie Elkington's beautiful face shaped itself before his mind's eyes, he cried out in sudden protest:

"Great God—it is impossible!"

"But eet ees zee truth!" sounded the half-breed's vehement voice. "Ah swear by zee Holy Mass dat eet ees truth!" Clancy had no need of Dubosc's oath. In reality he did not question the general truth of the half-breed's statement. Though he fought against conviction, he was already convinced, and as he stood there he was wondering what he should do. Dubosc also was interested in his possible action, and watched him closely, then after a little he asked, "You weel go to zee camp of Elkington, M'sieu Clancy?"

"Yes," answered the corporal, a hard note in his voice. "When we have breakfasted we will break camp, and paddle down to him. There are things I want to ask him."

A flash of relief came in the half-breed's sullen eyes at the words, and he gave a sharp laugh. "Dat Ah can un'erstand, M'sieu Clancy. You weel hav' mooch to ask, *oui*—mooch, an' maybe Yankee Ben he hav' mooch to tell."

Clancy did not reply. Hastily he began to prepare

breakfast, and whilst the half-breed, in spite of his manacled hands, managed to make a good meal, he himself ate little, and from time to time lifted his head to look at the smoky column which had now grown less dense. Whilst the half-breed was still eating, he began to strike camp, and in a very short time they were ready to start.

"You'll have to help to paddle, Jean. I shall take off the handcuffs, and put you in the bow. But no tricks, remember."

"Ah weel remembraire," answered the half-breed.

"If you do forget, it will be for the last time. On the least attempt to escape I shall shoot."

"Dere weel be not any need for dat!" replied Dubosc with a grin, and with his hands unlocked, took his place in the bow of the canoe.

They started off at a good pace, leaving the half-breed's canoe where he had placed it on the previous night. The column of smoke was no longer visible; but Clancy, knowing just where the Elkington camp had been pitched, did not need it to guide him, and as they progressed he kept a keen look-out for any sign of movement on the lake's surface, but saw none. He was a little puzzled by the fact, and when two hours had passed stared thoughtfully at the little bay where the camp had been pitched. In the morning light he could see it quite clearly. The tents were gone, whilst there was no indication of human presence anywhere on the lakeside. The disappearance of the tents was not surprising. The Elkingtons must long ago have struck camp and resumed their journey, but the non-appearance of their canoe troubled him and at last he spoke to Dubosc.

"What has happened, Jean? The camp is broken, but there's no sign of any canoe."

The half-breed replied over his shoulder: "Ah

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expec' dey mak' cut up zee river to zee leetle lac across zee woods dere."

"But I didn't know there was a river!"

"Dere ees, but so leetle ees eet, dat eet hav' no name. Eet run vaire quick, an' to paddle ees of not any use. But the pole, dat is possible, an' eet ees quicker dan to mak' portage."

"And you think they have gone that way?"

"Where else can dey hav' gone, unless dey hav' taken to zee woods? Not on the lac no, so dey hav' gone up the river, certainment."

"You're probably right. But all the same we'll take a look at the camp."

Half an hour later they reached the bay where the Elkington camp had been pitched, and on the corporal's order the half-breed stepped out and examined the ashes of the fire, whilst Clancy covered him with the rifle.

"Fire hav' been stamped out; but zee ashes are still warm, m'sieu."

"Yes! Anything else?"

The half-breed indicated a little pile of small boughs, and some white chips. "Dey cut saplings for poles, you understand, dey go up zee leetle river as Ah tell you."

"Yes, I think you're right, Jean, and we'll go up the river too. There's a creek opens out there." He waved his hand to the right. "That's your nameless river, I suppose?"

"Oui, m'sieu."

"Then just cut and dress a couple of poles. Here's the axe, and remember I have you covered."

The half-breed grinned as he took the axe. Apparently with careless resignation, he had accepted the situation in which he found himself and he cut the poles, and returned the hatchet without trouble;

then together they paddled to the mouth of the creek, and began to push their way up the bawling waterway. At first they were able to use the paddles, and, clinging close to the shore to escape the rush of water, made fair progress. But presently the current grew too strong for paddling, and they were driven to use the spruce poles which Dubosc had cut and dressed. It was no light task to push the laden canoe against hurrying water. Standing in the bow, feet apart, setting all his weight and strength against the racing water, the half-breed proved himself an expert riverman worthy of his voyageur forbears. And Clancy, though less expert, was reliable, holding the canoe with the long pole, whilst his companion took a fresh hold for a further thrust forward.

So for a time they progressed, forgetting their relationship as captor and prisoner in a community of strenuous action; but presently, as the character of the stream changed, even poling became impossible. The nature of the banks on either hand made tracking with the tow-line also an impossibility, and there remained only one alternative and that the most uncomfortable of all.

"There's nothing else for it, Jean. We've got to go over-side."

"Oui!" agreed the half-breed, still wearing his new air of philosophical resignation.

They slipped out of the canoe, fully clothed as they were, and with the half-breed at the bow and the corporal at the stern, literally thrust the canoe forward against the racing current. The water was ice-cold. Sometimes it was no more than knee-deep, and at others it swirled to the waist, whilst when they found an occasional hole one or the other slipped in to the arm-pits. More than once it required all their united strength, Dubosc pulling at the bow, and Clancy with

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his shoulder at the stern, to get the canoe forward at all. Once in a rushing rapid the big half-breed was swung clean off his feet and lost his hold on the canoe, which swirled round, narrowly missing overturning, and the corporal, digging one heel in the bottom and bracing the other foot against a rock, was only just able to hold it as it swung with its bow down-stream.

Dubosc swore fluently in the patois of his kind as he recovered himself, and without further ado took his place anew, toiling and heaving in the strenuous comradeship of the wilds. That seemingly impossible comradeship between men standing in the relation these two men did to each other was fully demonstrated when, twenty minutes or so later, Clancy, slipping on a round stone, lost his footing completely, and clinging desperately with one hand at the stern he swung out his full length in a deep swirl. Dubosc might have taken his freedom then. He had but to release his hold, and the canoe with the corporal would have whirled into a rough place where rocks tore the water to tatters; then, before Clancy could possibly have recovered himself, the half-breed might have waded ashore and plunged into the dense woods.

Dubosc, however, did not seize the advantage his captor's mishap offered. Instead, engrossed in the task as he was, the voyageur's instinct asserted itself. Instantly both his heels wedged themselves in the bed of the river, and with all his bulk thrown against the current, and arms at full stretch, he held on grimly, until the corporal recovered himself and found his footing once more.

"Thanks, Jean!" said Clancy lightly.

Dubosc understood him, and made light of his own instinctive action. "Mon Dieu!" he cried, "would you dat I lose zee grub?"

"Only that?" cried Clancy, with a gasping laugh.

"What oder t'ing?" demanded the half-breed.

"Oh," laughed Clancy, who understood better than Dubosc what had happened, "if you don't know, there is no reason why I should explain."

They pressed on again and toiled harder than any galley slaves until they came to the remains of a small fire still smouldering on the bank. Dubosc drew attention to it with a wave of his hand.

"Elkington he take rest here, also tea, which is vaire good when zee legs be frozen to zee marrow."

"Yes," agreed Clancy, "and we will follow suit."

They landed, gathered dry sticks and replenished the dying fire. Whilst the water boiled they cooked food, and when all was ready made a hearty meal, washing it down with copious draughts of scalding tea. They made no change of clothing, for after a brief respite the toiling ascent of the river must begin anew, and any change would have been a mere waste of time. Whilst they steamed in front of the fire, the corporal watched his prisoner closely, but saw no indication of the half-breed's desire to escape. The man stood there apathetic, the sullen look once more on his face, apparently a man resigned to the inevitable.

But Jean Dubosc was far from that. The sullen mask of his face hid a cunning that was a direct heritage from his Indian mother; and all the time his primitive mind was working for his freedom, as it had been from the moment when he had awakened to consciousness with the handcuffs on his wrist. He knew, as well as his captor, that once he reached the police post there remained nothing for him but the hangman's rope, and that end he meant to escape. Time and again during the preparation of the meal he might have made a breakaway into the forest; but as he knew full well that was but to deliver himself to the

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madness that comes from loneliness and starvation. It was true that he had let one opportunity slip by him that morning, when, following the swift instinct of the riverman, he had held the canoe when, if he had released it, his own freedom might have been assured, but that troubled him not at all, for at the end of this toilsome climb towards the smaller lake he was assured that he would achieve his liberty. He had the inestimable advantage of knowing the corporal's plans, and he was aware of elements in the situation of which his captor was utterly ignorant, but which would make directly for the latter's undoing. He therefore abode his time, sullen of aspect, apparently indifferent to the fate awaiting him, but inwardly confident of his power to evade it.

When they resumed the trying journey he was still the willing worker, toiling like a Hercules, indefatigable, undismayed by the constant succession of minor accidents that dogged their progress ; and when on the approach of night they camped, he submitted with deceptive meekness to the remanacling of his hands.

" I'm sorry to do it, Jean," said Clancy with genuine regret. " You've not been a bad sort to-day ; but duty's duty, and I can't afford to let you make the get-away in the night."

The half-breed gave no more articulate reply than a grunt, submitted further to the tethering with the hide rope ; and with the blanket drawn almost up to his eyes apparently composed himself to sleep. But when the corporal's regular breathing told him that his captor slept, he threw back the blanket, and gently raising himself stared about him in the darkness. He made no attempt to release himself, that as he knew would have been quite useless. With his back against a tree, for something like two hours he maintained a

watchful, listening attitude, as though awaiting the advent of some one from the flickering shadows of the moonlit wood. Once when a twig snapped somewhere in the wood his attitude grew tense and alert, and after a swift glance at the sleeping corporal he stared eagerly into the shadows of the wood, his sombre eyes, as revealed by the firelight, aglow with expectation.

Nothing happened, however. The sound, which had probably been made by some wild creature moving through the wood, was not repeated, and presently the expectation died out of his eyes ; and at the end of his two hours' vigil, he slid down into his blanket, and this time really gave himself to sleep, no hard task after the exhausting labour of the day.

The day that followed was in the main a repetition of the experiences they had already passed through ; varied, however, by a rather long portage, and with stretches of water where it was possible to use the paddle. Late in the afternoon they reached the end of their heart-breaking task, in a small lake from which the stream they had followed flowed. It was long and narrow, being perhaps three miles from shore to shore in its narrowest part, whilst the length of it could not be judged from the point where they were, since a high hill round which the lake seemed to turn hid from view one end of it.

Standing in the canoe, Clancy closely surveyed the surface of the lake and the tree-clad shores. The weird cry of a loon alone broke the intense silence ; the bird itself, flying low above the grey waters, was the only moving thing in the landscape. The bosom of the lake revealed no canoe, the darkening shores of it no gleam of fire or white column of smoke to indicate the whereabouts of the men whom they followed. Staring in perplexity, not wishing to waste a single moment of daylight, but uncertain which way to

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follow, Clancy started suddenly as a faint sound broke on his ears. He looked at his companion.

"You heard that, Dubosc?"

"Oui, M'sieu Corporal. Some mans fire hees gun!"

"And the sound came from that direction?" said Clancy, waving his hand in the direction of the hill round which the lake turned.

"Dat ees so!" agreed the half-breed.

"Then that's our way. It isn't likely there is another party up on the lake so close to winter. We'll try that way, anyhow."

Without delay they began to paddle in the direction of the hill; but whilst they were yet a mile from it, the fall of night and intolerable weariness drove them shorewards to camp.

"We will start early in the morning, Jean. Maybe we shall overtake Benedict Elkington before he breaks camp."

"An' eef you do, m'sieu?"

"Oh!" said the corporal in a hard voice. "I'll make him tell the truth."

No more was said, and after a couple of pipes had been smoked the ritual of the previous night was observed, the half-breed without protest submitting his wrists to the manacles, his ankles to the tethering rope, and once more drew the blanket to his eyes. For an hour he lay quite still, but as the moon lifted above the dark woods across the lake, the blanket slid back, he glanced once at the recumbent figure of the corporal, then, raising himself into a sitting posture, he stared steadily towards the bend of the lake.

This time his vigil was not unduly prolonged. Less than three-quarters of an hour had passed, when in the frosty moonlight shimmering on the lake he caught sight of a moving shadow, a shadow whose progress was marked by gleams and shining ripples.

A swift excitement came on his face ; and as the shadow drew nearer, resolving itself into a canoe paddled by two men, he glared malevolently at the sleeping Clancy. In his sullen heart he hated the man who had made him his captive, and who meant to take him down to Edmonton to be hung by the police. The faint sound of the paddles came across the quiet water, and Dubosc watched with suppressed excitement the progress of the canoe as it turned towards the fire on the shore. Now and again he glanced at Clancy, as if expecting him to awake, but the latter, dog-tired, slept on, even when from the distance of a dozen yards there came a hail from the canoe.

“ Je-a-an ! ”

The half-breed made no audible reply, but rising to his feet waved them forward with his manacled hands.

“ What ther blazes—— ” began a voice with a strong American accent, only to be interrupted by a sharp warning hiss from Dubosc.

It was at that moment that Clancy opened his eyes, passing from his sleep to full wakefulness like a healthy child. His first glance was at his prisoner, and as he saw him standing there in the moonlight, a look of triumph on his face, he became aware of the canoe with the two men in it, now close in shore. He leaped quickly to his feet, but as he did so, Dubosc, with his manacled hands raised high, leaped also. The hide-thong about his legs held, throwing him forward ; but as he fell, with all his great might he brought the manacles on his wrists down on the corporal's head. Clancy staggered back, sagged suddenly, and then slid to the ground and lay still.

“ Que diable avez-vous ? ” shouted one of the newcomers, landing and running forward.

The other paused long enough to lift the canoe

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out of the water, then he also ran forward, stopped suddenly as he caught sight of the corporal lying in the circle of firelight.

"Jer-u-sha!" he cried. "If it ain't that blamed mounter! What——"

"He come after me," cried Jean. "He would take me to Edmonton to hav' me hang. But first he would see Elkington, for he ees Sir Clancy's son."

"Clancy's son!" The American cried incredulously, and then dropped on his knees and stared closely into the corporal's unconscious face. After a moment a long whistle broke from him. "Phew! I b'leve you're right, Jean. He's the living spit of the old dog. What's he want to see Elkington for again? Has he any inkling——"

"He know something of zee story, an' Ah tell heem more, to get heem to follow, for Ah know dat one night you weel come back to talk wit' mees, an' den Ah shall be make free. Heem want to see Elkington, to make heem tell what hav' happen' to Sir Clancy, for he would zee man hang dat hav' keel his father."

"Well, I'm d——d," said the American. "What's to be done?"

"First you weel find zee key to unlock dese strong bracelets, den we weel cut loose my legs, an' afder dat we weel confer what we weel with heem do."

The American dropped on his knees and searched the corporal until he found the key of the handcuffs. Then he released Dubosc, and before the latter could interfere flung the handcuffs far out in the lake.

"Fool! Fool!" cried the half-breed in sudden rage. "What for do dat?"

"Why, what's ther odds?"

"We could heem hav' make fast with dem, an' hav' leave heem here——"

"Je—osh! I never thought of that! But anyway we can tie him up."

"Or keel——"

"None o' that!" broke in the other. "A dead mounter's worse nor a live one, becos he'll bring ther whole bloomin' bunch on our trail, an' they won't rest till they get us. I don't mind risking a noose, but I want fair stakes for the gamble. What do you say, Anton?"

"Ah say we need not keel, non! We tak' Jean along wit' us; we burn zee canoe, an' tak' zee rifle, an' leav' zee mounter here all on hees alonesome. Before he can get out, zee winter come an' zee winter eet weel keel, certainment!"

"Yes, that what I call hoss-sense, an' as it's two to one I guess that goes, Jean. Just tie up that feller with that piece of hide while ther fire burns up a bit, an' we make other final dispositions. He'll be comin' too in a jiffy, an' we'd better have him scotched when he does."

With a grin of malevolence wrinkling his face, the half-breed began to carry out the instructions, displaying a science and thoroughness that betrayed that it was not the first time that he had so pinioned a man.

CHAPTER V

A DEAD TRAPPER

WHEN Terence Clancy awakened to consciousness the first thing that he saw was a wrecked canoe burning on the fire. He did not know for certain that it was his; but it was not difficult to guess that it was, and a moment later he was left in no doubt. Dubosc, seeing that he was now conscious, bent over him in gloating triumph.

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"So, M'sieu Clancy, you look an' see your canoe burn! Weel you now tak' me down to zee police post dat you may see me hang?"

"Yes," answered Clancy, with a conviction he was far from feeling.

"M'sieu Clancy, you are a droll man, vaire droll. But you hav' a mistake made. Ah shall not go down to zee post wit' you, because why? You weel not go to zee post evaire again."

Clancy realized the menace that lay behind the words, but he was absolutely undisturbed by it. "Either with me or with some other policeman you will go down to the post, Jean Dubosc."

"Non! Non!" shrieked the half-breed, and shaking his clenched fist at Clancy, suddenly struck him a cowardly blow.

"Steady, Jean," said the American, interposing. "There's no need for that. You've got the mounter where you want him, an' third-degree business is off. Just poke up the fire a bit, an' leave the feller alone."

The half-breed glared savagely at the speaker for a moment; then, as the other showed no sign of changing his attitude, he gave an abrupt laugh and turned away. The American looked at the corporal, then he said: "You'll have yer chance, such as it is, an' I wouldn't chuck et away by rowelling a feller who's already raw."

Clancy made no reply; but lay there wondering what the chance the man spoke of would be, and then fell to wondering what was the connexion between these two men and the man so lately his prisoner. He had instantly recognized the two as Elkington's guides, and it was not difficult to guess that the three were somehow leagued together. Nor was it any way difficult to divine what had befallen. Jean Dubosc

had been following Elkington's party at a discreet distance, and when he had been made prisoner had schemed to induce him to follow, by telling him the story of his father's undoing. Probably between the half-breed and Elkington's guides there had existed some arrangement by which they should keep in touch with each other, and Dubosc had staked all on the possibility of his cronies discovering his plight. That explained the philosophic resignation that he had manifested and the willingness he had brought to the heavy task of ascending the river between the two lakes. Every yard up the rapids, won with such heroic toil, had been for him a step nearer freedom, and Dubosc had known it all the time.

Lying there and reviewing the situation, Clancy did not blame himself for what had happened. Only at one point had the half-breed come near to betraying a too intimate knowledge that might have been a warning to himself if he had not at that moment been so eager to learn what the half-breed could tell him of his father's death. That point had been when the half-breed had shown astonishment when he had told him of the visit he had paid to the Elkington camp. Without being told, he had known whose that camp was, and in the light of subsequent events the corporal realized that that was a suspicious thing, though in the excitement induced by the dramatic climax of the half-breed's story he had entirely overlooked it. There was, however, no help for it now, and he passed from it to the consideration of other things. What was the position in regard to Elkington and his guides?

He recalled the scrap of conversation he had overheard, and his own forgotten intention to warn the American. Was there need for that warning? Unquestionably, his mind replied instantly. Elking-

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ton's journey had an interest to these men that was not explained by their position as guides ; and Jean Dubosc, shadowing them less than a day's camp behind, and in active association with them, gave point to that interest. But what was the interest ? He remembered the manuscript which Elkington had been studying when Mollie Elkington and he had arrived at the camp, and the words of the two guides which he had overheard on his return journey ; and his mind, now awake to salient facts, linked with those words Dubosc's talk of the gold-mine that he had found ; and quite suddenly he understood.

The half-breed had found no gold-mine, but he followed the trail of Elkington in the belief that he was leading him to one. The finding of that mine was the rather mysterious enterprise on which the American was engaged ; and it was in that prospective mine that he had been offered a partnership. Like a flash of dazzling light it came to him that the gold which the American was seeking was the gold which his father had mentioned in the last letter he had penned, before the silence of the North had enveloped him.

For a moment the sudden realization of the truth left him stunned, momentarily indifferent to the danger which menaced himself. All the interest in his own doings displayed by Elkington and his daughter was now fully explained ; and as he recalled the girl's beautiful face, a surge of bitterness flooded his heart. She had known his story all the time, as her father had ; and whilst he himself had told it, had probably been secretly laughing at him. They—

"Guess we're about through with this arson business," broke in the American's voice on his thoughts. "Sling the mounter into the canoe."

The words recalled him to the peril of his own

position ; and as the two half-breeds lifted him into the canoe, he wondered if by any chance it was their purpose to drown him in the lake. A moment later, however, he was reassured.

"Paddle straight across. I guess we'll maroon him in the woods on ther other side. It'll take him days ter walk round ther lake, an' we'll be safe away before he's 'arf way round."

"Eet would be a safer t'ing to stick a knife into——"

"No, Jean ! I'm off plain killing. If ther feller wins out——"

"Dat ees not possible, non !" laughed the man Anton. "He weel not hav' zee gun to keel game, nor zee hatchet to cut wood, nor zee lines to catch zee fish. For a leetle time maybe he weel eat zee berries an' roots, den zee snow come and he will die."

"That's as may happen," said the American. "It's no affair of ourn. He'll be free to do what he likes, an' his blood won't be on our hands."

In other circumstances Clancy could have laughed at this naïve casuistry ; but at the moment, as he realized the fate in store for him, terror gripped his soul. He had heard of other men lost in the great woods of the North without the means of life ; and for one moment he visioned himself wandering in the wild, haunted by the spectre of starvation, overborne to madness by the terrific solitude. Then he braced himself, recognizing that the chance of life, slender though it was, was still his, and giving no sign of fear, he lay there quite still, until the canoe was beached on the farther side. There he was lifted out of the canoe, and tossed on the bank. The man Joe cut his bonds whilst Anton covered him with the rifle, then the canoe was re-launched, and as the conspirators paddled away, Dubosc's voice came to him in mocking farewell :

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" Adieu ! M'sieu Corporal. Ah t'ink you weel not tak' me to Edmonton to be hang, après tout ! "

His laughter tauntingly rang in the stillness of the night, but Clancy condescended to no reply. He stood there watching with unfathomable eyes the canoe receding in the moonlight, then when it was little more than a dim shadow on the lake, he turned and looked about him. Behind him there was nothing visible but the deep shadow of the primeval woods which bordered the lake on every side. Across the water he could discern quite clearly the radiance of the fire where his own camp had been pitched and down the lake he thought he could discern a faint red point representing the fire beside which, as he guessed, Mollie Elkington and her father would be sleeping.

With the dying away of the sound of the paddles, a deathly stillness had fallen on the world ; and that stillness, rather than the frosty nip of the air, made him shiver, and, as he shivered, once more terror surged within him like a tidal wave. The thought of what lay before him shook his spirit, so that he could have cried out in fear. He understood quite well the desperateness of his position. It was at least three hundred and seventy miles to the nearest police or trading post, three hundred and seventy miles of country so wild that the waterways were the only feasible lines of travel ; and in a week, perhaps in a single day, winter would swoop down out of the Arctic, bringing with it the intense cold that for him would mean speedy death. What the fellow Anton had so brutally set forth was true. Without rifle or hatchet or fishing-lines he would be driven to eat berries and roots until the snow came and then——

Despair flooded his heart, then suddenly he remembered something, Jean Dubosc's canoe, they had

left it on the bank of the lower lake ! If he could reach that all was not yet lost.

With that thought a tiny spark of hope kindled, and his mind began to work coolly once more. He would have to work round the head of the lake there, follow the bank of the turbulent river that had been ascended at the cost of so much toil, and afterwards make his way along the shore of the lower lake to where the canoe had been left. Even then, his chance of winning out would be of the slenderest, as the serrated edge of the thin shore ice at his feet reminded him ; but it was the only possible course, and he knew that he must take it.

Standing there, he tried to estimate the distance to be traversed, and calculated that in three days, four at the most, he might reach the canoe, sustaining life with such food as the land afforded for a weaponless man. And after that—— His thoughts broke off there, as his mind refused to consider the possibilities beyond. For the immediate present his single objective must be the abandoned canoe ; and whatever was to follow must be dealt with as the need arose. "Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof."

With that tag of Scripture in his mind, he turned and began to walk along the bank of the lake. Sleep was for the time utterly impossible ; and, with the imperative need for haste driving him, it was folly to waste a moment's time in gloomy anticipations that could only weaken his purpose.

How long he stumbled through the wood, and at what time, too dog-weary to take another step, he threw himself upon the dry needles under a giant spruce, he never knew ; but it was broad day when he awakened, stiff with his exertions of the previous night and numbed with the bitter cold. Stepping

forward a few yards he found himself on the lake bank. The sun was shining, but there was little warmth in the air, and the rim ice running far out from the shore told of the frost that had ruled through the night. Before him the waters of the lake stared blank as Modred's shield. He surveyed its grey expanse from end to end, but nowhere was there any sign of the man who had left him to his fate ; nor a hint of life anywhere. The lake, the sombre woods and the silence awoke a sense of desolation in him that he had to fight hard against, and knowing that action was the best antidote he began to forage for breakfast.

The wood offered neither berries nor nuts, but as he thrust his way onward, he came to the bank of a small stream emptying itself in the lake, and there he stood quite still, watching, and presently caught sight of something moving up the current. It was a whitefish, and as he watched he saw others, and with kindling hope he began to walk upstream until he came to a place where the water shallowed suddenly ; and there he left the bank, and standing in the icy water waited, as still as a heron in a like situation. Several fish passed him, without any move on his part, then one drifted by him close to the shallower water inshore. He made a sudden move, and the fish darted away from him, stranding itself in the shoaling water. He made a grab, slipped, and literally fell on the fish, stunning it. A moment later he was up, the fish in his hands. Wading ashore, he gathered sticks, and taking from his inner pocket the water-proof tin of matches that he always carried made a fire and cooked the fish, and using his hand for a cup, quenched his thirst at the stream.

Then, much refreshed, he retraced his way to the lakeside, and began the day's march, keeping always

in sight of the water, lest he should lose himself in the wood. Unencumbered by pack or rifle he made a good pace ; but an hour before noon, with a rising wind behind him, and the frosty brightness obliterated by driving clouds that had in them a hint of snow, he struck a wide valley the bottom of which was one great stretch of muskeg, where the thick moss was white with frost. He looked at it doubtfully. He knew that underneath was quaking bog, and that the safest way was to walk round it ; but the white frost, which covered it like snow, suggested that it might be frozen sufficiently hard to bear his weight. Pressed as he was for time, he started to make the risky crossing, but had gone but a few yards, when one foot went through the frozen crust, and he sank up to the knee in the mud beneath. With a considerable effort he managed to free himself, and realizing that the risk of being bogged was too great he turned back and began to walk up the valley. It was two hours before he was able to make a crossing where the valley narrowed and formed the bed of a stream that apparently lost itself lower down ; and by that time there was a roar of wind in the pines, and a brief snowstorm that drove him to the trees for shelter.

When the snow passed and he emerged into the open once more there was a marked fall in the temperature, and he shivered in the icy wind. He felt despair mounting in his heart. If winter came early as the cold and the snow omened, the task he had set himself was impossible. He could not reach the canoe, and if he did it would be little use ; for within a few days, if the cold was continuous and not a mere snap, the frost would set its seal upon the waters, and close them as waterways until the break-up in the spring. Death from the bitter cold or exhaustion awaited him, walked with him even now, setting a cold hand on

the springs of courage, making him afraid of what lay ahead. What was it that the woman in Job had said? "Curse God—curse God—and die!" But he would not do that, though despair whispered that die he must. He would not yield one iota of his purpose, though he was doomed to fail, and to perish miserably. Sweating, yet with the icy wind nipping him, he marched on, breasted the hill on the other side of the valley; and then stood quite still, startled by what lay beyond; for there in a little clearing in the wood stood a small cabin. He stared at it unbelievably as at some mirage. The thing was too good to hope for—too unexpected to be true. Then with a sudden chill he saw that the place had a forlorn appearance, that no smoke issued from the stone chimney, that weeds and grass in front of the door had an untrodden look.

"Deserted!" he said tonelessly, but began to move towards it.

As he approached it, he was convinced that the place was untenanted; but, nevertheless, he halted in front of the door, and knocked. There was no response. He knocked again, and a second later observing a strip of hide which evidently had been meant to do duty for a latch-string, he pulled it and thrust his weight against the door. It opened with a little creaking groan, and he peered inside. As he did so, a sickly, musty odour drifted to him; and as he drew back, without having seen anything, he divined the lonely tragedy of this solitary cabin. Leaving the door wide open, he walked to the farther side of the cabin, where he found a parchment window, which he broke in with a stick; and after waiting a few minutes he returned to the door and entered.

A rough table with a pannikin on it was the first thing that met his view; the second was the cold

stove with a rusting kettle upon it ; the third was a pile of pelts neatly stacked in a corner ; and in the opposite corner, at which he looked last, was a rough bunk, where reposed the still, mummified figure of a man.

For a minute or two he did not move towards that silent figure, but stood staring at it, wondering what tragedy the lonely cabin had witnessed. Then he took a couple of steps forward and looked more closely. The light streaming from the broken window fell directly on the bunk, and he saw the mummified face, the closed eyes, the bared teeth, the skin, like parchment. The rest of the figure was hidden under a rabbit-skin covering which the corporal did not remove. Apparently the man had died quite peacefully in this solitary cabin, remote from his kind ; and, with his last sleep undisturbed by any human visitors or prowling beasts, had lain there for at least a couple of years. A few steel traps thrown carelessly in a corner, with the pelts that he had already observed, told Clancy that the dead man had followed the occupation of trapper ; and he began to examine the dead man's possessions more carefully.

His heart leaped suddenly, as his eyes fell on a rifle resting on some wooden pegs fastened to the cabin wall. He moved towards it quickly, and taking it in his hands examined it carefully.

It was a '405 Winchester, a little rusted externally, but apparently in perfect condition, and as he opened the breech he saw that there was a live cartridge in the chamber. With that discovery he experienced a great uplift of hope, and began feverishly to inspect the other things that the cabin held. He found a couple of hatchets, a long knife, a store of matches, two small sacks of beans and one of flour a large canister of tea, a tin box with sugar, a whole

store of provisions such as a man following a lonely trapping line would take with him to carry him through the winter, two pairs of snow-shoes, a heavy fur parka, and last but not least he found two unbroken boxes of ammunition for the rifle.

Whatever had been the cause of the owner's death it had not been starvation, and recognizing that by these things he himself was to be saved from dying of hunger and cold, Clancy stepped outside to think. Lighting his pipe, he began to pace to and fro, his mind busy with the problem of the course to be followed. This cabin with its store of food meant that his situation was no longer quite desperate. Even if winter swooped suddenly from the North, as it threatened, he had now the means of life ; and would be able to survive without leaving the district where his quarry was. Nor was there any real necessity to give up the trail. With the hatchets, if he set to work, he might fashion some sort of a dugout in which to continue the pursuit, whilst the lake remained open, and——

A new thought came to him suddenly. How had the dead trapper come to this place where his trapping line was situated? It was scarcely likely that he had waited until winter, and made the journey by dog-train over the snows. That would have meant the waste of weeks of the trapping season, quite apart from the unnecessary rigour of the journey. Obviously the waterway before the ice formed was the easier way and the one that the dead man must have followed.

Knowing the ways of the dwellers in the wilderness, he walked all round the cabin, and inspected the trees in the neighbourhood carefully. Then quite suddenly he found what he sought, a canoe suspended bottom up between two trees. He examined it carefully before lifting it down. The thick spruces between which it had been slung had shaded it from the sun,

but summer heats had cracked some of the seams, and it was certain that it would leak like a sieve. This, however, troubled him nothing. The means of repair were at hand in the woods, and half a day's work would suffice to put it right. He lifted the canoe down carefully, and carrying it to the front of the cabin, set it down on the grass. Then he looked up the silent lake, frostily cold and dark under a leaden sky, and gave a sudden sharp laugh.

"Au revoir—not adieu, Jean Dubosc. I think you will be hanged at Edmonton after all."

CHAPTER VI

TREACHERY !

ON the night when Jean Dubosc was delivered from custody by his friends, Mollie Elington found that she could not sleep, and after a time gave up the attempt. Rising, she slipped on a heavy coat, and passed outside the tent. The night was marvellously still, the moonlight made the lake a perfect mirror, and after standing for a moment enamoured by the utter stillness and tranquillity she began to pace to and fro in order to keep herself warm, for the night, in spite of its beauty, was cold and frosty. As she walked, her mind began to dwell on Corporal Clancy pursuing a dangerous criminal through the infinite wilderness of the North, and she found herself wishing that he had accepted her father's offer.

"If he only had——" she whispered to herself, then the whisper broke off, and she came to a sudden standstill, her eyes riveted on the space immediately beyond the fire.

For a moment she stared incredulously, then she took a few steps forward, and when close to the fire

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halted again. At her feet were some tumbled blankets, showing where the two guides had lain, but the guides themselves were not there. When she realized this she looked hastily towards the shore where the Peterboro' canoe had lain, to find that it also had disappeared.

Her first hasty thought was that Montana Joe and his companion had deserted, leaving her father and herself almost helpless in the heart of this serene but terrible wilderness. A second glance, however, showed her the stores stacked as they had been when the camp had been made, with the guides' rifles in their coverings lying on the top. The sight of those reassured her, and banished the idea of desertion from her mind, but nevertheless she was puzzled. Where had the two men gone and for what purpose? They could not have taken the canoe in pursuit of game, or the rifles would not have been left in camp. She cudgelled her brains, but could think of no other legitimate reason for their disappearance; and perplexed and disturbed by their mysterious absence, she was on the point of awakening her father, when across the water there came a sudden sound of laughter and of voices.

She looked carefully in the direction from which the sound came, but for a moment or two saw nothing; then from the other side of a little bluff situated about a quarter of a mile from her emerged the canoe, ruffling the mirror-like surface of the lake with silvery ripples. She saw it quite clearly, silhouetted against the gleam of the moonlit water, and to her extreme amazement saw that it held three men instead of two. Her first thought was that the three men who held her gaze were strangers, hunters or prospectors who like her father were pushing North whilst the waterways were open and travelling late in order to reach their destination more speedily. Five seconds later,

however, that thought was dismissed, for the canoe having rounded the little reef of rock at the foot of the bluff turned shoreward, plainly making for the point at which the camp was pitched. At the same moment a voice reached her.

"Better chuck the mounter's gun into the lake, Jean. If Elkington happens ter put eyes on it, he may ask questions."

She recognized the voice for that of Montana Joe, and knew now that two out of the three men must be her father's servants. But who was the third man? She was still wondering when his reply reached her.

"Non! non! Eet ees a voire good gun!"

"Mebbe! But I'm boss here, an' I say Yus! Yus! Sling it over, Anton."

Apparently Anton was not disposed to question the American's authority, for a moment later something described an arc in the air and fell with a splash into the lake.

"Sacré!" sounded a savage voice. "What for you——"

"You've got ter obey orders if you join this outfit," broke in the American, "and we're not going ter have ther game spoiled by foolery, Jean. Just chew on that, an' you'll find things a sight more comfortable."

Mollie Elkington did not stop to hear more. The canoe was approaching the shore, and it did not seem advisable to let these men find her standing there listening to their unguarded conversation. Keeping well in the shadows at the back of the fire, she slipped round to the opening of the tent, and once behind its canvas walls she stood quite still, continuing to play the part of eavesdropper.

She heard little, however. The three men having

beached the canoe seated themselves by the fire, and apparently rendered cautious by the proximity of others, conducted their conversation in whispers. Through the tent-flies she could see them quite plainly, and the aroma of burning tobacco reached her on the frosty air ; but their guarded whispering prevented her from hearing, and seldom were the voices raised sufficiently loud for her to hear what was said. Once, however, a sentence or two reached her.

" Ah say steeck a knife in heem till he give eet up ! "

" You say, Jean ! " answered the American in heavy scorn. " You can say it till yer blue ! It's what I say that goes in this outfit, an' nothing else. "

" S-s-sh-h ! "

The warning came from the man Anton, and again the conversation dropped to whispering inaudible to the girl. For something like half an hour this whispered conversation continued, then she caught the American's voice again.

" So that's ther game, an' don't yer forget it, Jean, or you'll give ther show away. "

" Ah weel remembair ! " came the reply ; and then the men knocked out their pipes, rolled themselves in their blankets and composed themselves for sleep.

For Mollie Elkington, however, there was no sleep, though she lay down on the camp bedstead in her tent. Her mind was at the gallop reviewing what she had seen and the little that she had heard. Who was this stranger whom Joe and Anton had picked up in the solitude of the illimitable wilderness of the North ? Why should the mounter's gun be thrown into the lake in case her father should see it and make inconvenient inquiries ? As she asked herself the questions, quite suddenly, almost involuntarily, she visioned the strong lean face of Terence Clancy, and

she was conscious of a swift apprehension in her heart. Had the rifle which she had seen splash into the lake belonged to him? If it had, what had happened to Clancy himself?

The question troubled her greatly, the more so since the answer was not forthcoming. She found herself trying to remember the name of the man whose trail he had been following; but this eluded her, and presently her thoughts passed to other things. Who was it into whom the new-comer would stick a knife in order to make him give up something that the three men evidently desired?

Again, with a swift sense of alarm, her mind supplied the answer—her father! It could be no one else, and the thing that these men desired beyond all doubt was the parchment plan which her father carried, and which was the *raison d'être* of this wilderness journey. The more she considered the matter the more her alarm grew, until she was almost overcome by a consciousness of the danger in which she and her father moved.

In the first few days after leaving Athabasca Landing, her father, as he had hinted to Corporal Clancy, had had his faith in his guides shaken, and now to Mollie it was revealed that the men were deliberately treacherous, and that somehow they had become aware of the objective of this long and strenuous journey. She was appalled by the thought of all that the situation involved, and knew now that neither her father nor herself was safe whilst they were with these men, who, if the brutal words of the new-comer were any indication of the temper of the trio, would be absolutely ruthless and unscrupulous in the attainment of their desire. Her father must be warned, and at once, since to-morrow might be too late, or at least might fail to afford any opportunity.

Rising and creeping to the doorway of the tent, she peeped out. The three men were lying by the dying fire in attitudes of profound slumber. She watched them for quite a long time. None of them moved, or gave any indication of being other than asleep; and after waiting a little while longer, she left her own tent and crept silently towards the one occupied by her father. She reached it without misadventure, and, finding the front unlaced, slipped inside. Her father was sleeping lightly and at her first touch awakened and sat upright.

"Why," Mollie—" he began in a surprised voice, only to be checked by her hand placed swiftly over his mouth, "S-s-s-h-h!"

"What is it?" he asked in a whisper, as the girl dropped her hand.

"I will tell you," she answered, in the lightest of whispers. "Don't interrupt me, and remember one of those men may awaken, and if he should hear us talking it will precipitate matters."

Then, whilst her father stared at her wonderingly, she gave him an account of the events she had witnessed and the words she had overheard. Elkington listened without speaking or moving to the end, then suddenly he stretched an arm, and jerking an automatic pistol from a holster which lay close to his sleeping-place, he carefully examined the weapon, as if to assure himself that it was in good order. His daughter found the action very significant, and divined from it that he shared her suspicions, and confirmation of the thought was afforded by his first words.

"We're in the soup, Mollie. Those treacherous blackguards know what we are after."

"I'm afraid so," whispered the girl back.

"What did you say was the name of the fellow whom Joe and Anton brought in?"

"Jean!"

"Jean. And he had a mounter's gun that Joe was afraid that I might notice. Say, Mollie, wasn't that the name of the man whom Terence Clancy was after—Jean Dubosc?"

"Yes! Yes! I was trying to remember——"

"Seems to me that Clancy's hit against trouble."

"Yes," answered the girl. "I thought of that."

"And in that case, and unless we're alarming ourselves unnecessarily, we've nobody to depend upon but ourselves. It isn't likely that there's another trooper within four hundred miles. I wish from my heart that Clancy had come along with us."

"You ought to have told him everything, dad!"

"I know," agreed Elkington, "but wisdom after the event isn't much help. The question is, what are we going to do? Those blackguards are after the plan, sure, but they're not going to get it if I can help it."

"But how are you going to stop them?" asked the girl quickly.

"Leave that to me. I'll devise some way that will diddle them. The question is, what are we going to do in the morning? Those blackguards may show their hands or they may not; if they don't, I think the best thing will be to go on as if we suspected nothing, and wait for an opportunity to give them the slip. If one of these fine nights we can get away with the canoe and the stores, we'll beat these fellows to a frazzle. They won't be able to follow, and we can work back to the nearest H.B.C. post and pick up fresh guides."

"If it can be done——" began the girl doubtfully.

"It's just got to be, Mollie. Those fellows mean treachery, sure, and we shall have to beat 'em at their own game. Doesn't seem possible to fight them in

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a clean straight fight. There'd be too much risk for you." Elkington was silent for a moment, then he said thoughtfully, "I wonder what yarn they will put up in the morning to account for the coming of number three?"

"I don't know, but I think they have already arranged an explanation."

"You can bank on that, girlie, and I'll wager it's a water-tight. I should not be surprised to learn that Montana Joe has known all about the object of our journey from the very start."

"It seems very likely," answered the girl.

"But how he got on the scent of it puzzles me; for I have not so much as given him an inkling, and I'll swear that he has never handled the parchment."

"Perhaps he knew the story, and hearing our name put two and two together. The fact that we are going where scarcely anyone ever does go would help him."

"That is about it," answered Mr. Elkington, thoughtfully. "I wish, Mollie, I had not yielded to your insistence and had left you at home. I'm afraid there is going to be rough work before we are through with this job, particularly if this new-comer is Jean Dubosc. Clancy said he was a murderer." He broke off, and then added: "In this God-forsaken wilderness, a fellow like that isn't going to be troubled with scruples. And I'm afraid for you, my child."

"But I'm not afraid," said the girl, "not really. There is one thing that you can do, and that is to hide the parchment. Till they get their hands on that, they will not proceed to extremes."

"Yes, that was in my mind. I think we'll hide it now. If we bury it, when the trouble starts I can have lost it at one of the camping places; and that may induce them to go back on our trail to look for

it. There's always a remote chance that we may run against some one who will help us."

"Yes," agreed the girl, knowing that her father regarded the chance an extremely improbable one, but betraying nothing of her knowledge.

"Then we'll prepare for eventualities."

From an inner pocket of his tunic-shirt he took out a hard leather wallet with a silver clasp, looked at it for a moment, then whispered more to himself than to his daughter: "I wish I had never seen the thing."

Mollie Elkington was not sure that she shared the wish. Until three days ago when she had encountered Terence Clancy, the romantic journey in the wilderness had been one of unalloyed delight; for it was not given to every girl to play a part in a search for a lost gold-mine. Even the suggestion of gathering peril had its romantic side, and the lure of adventure still appealed to her as it had when she had wilfully insisted on accompanying her father into the wilderness. With interested eyes she watched him carefully cut away a sod and scoop away a handful or two of earth, and then deposit the wallet in the hole. That done he replaced the sod, carefully pressed it into place, and then looked through the doorway of the tent to where a large flat rock showed on the shore of the lake.

"Ten yards in a straight line from that rock, ten or thereabouts. That is near enough, and we need no other mark. The fact is, I've looked at the plan so often that I could draw it out of my head. And the directions——"

"Turn into the river where two hills, that we call the Paps of Jura, and which are shaped like a woman's breasts, show over the pinewoods. Follow the river till the second fall is reached, then follow

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the blazed trees on the left. The cliff rises sheer and is full of gold,' " quoted the girl whisperingly.

" Yes," said her father. " And by my calculations we are less than a week's journey from the place. If these blackguards——"

" S-s-s-h-h ! " Mollie Elkington lifted a warning finger.

They stood listening. From outside there came a sound of movement, and a second later a sharp, staccato exclamation, " Adieu, mounter ! "

They listened breathlessly, and a moment later there followed a rumble of inarticulate words of which they could make nothing.

" Some one talking in his sleep ! " whispered her father.

" The new-comer, for the voice is the voice of neither Joe nor Anton."

Her father nodded, and then the girl whispered again :

" ' Adieu, mounter ! ' I wonder what those words mean. I wonder what has happened to Clancy—for it must be he."

" Perhaps we shall find out presently," said her father. " And if we meet him again, I shall tell him all."

" That will be only right. If we had done it when ——"

" No use worrying over that now, Mollie. I think you had better go back to your own tent. One of those rogues may awaken, and if he should discover us in secret confabulation, it may precipitate matters. Get back and try to sleep."

" Yes, dad."

She kissed him lightly, and slipped back to her own tent, where she lay awake for a long time, her mind less exercised with the peril gathering around her father and herself than with the fate of Corporal

Clancy, who had refused to forsake the path of duty to follow the quest of fortune. That some untoward event had overtaken him she was convinced, and she was conscious of acute distress as she speculated what that fate might be. But finally sleep overtook her, and she slept till the cold of a bitter dawn awakened her to hear her father questioning the man Joe.

"Who do you say the man is?"

"Anton's brother, Jean by name. We heard him firin' off his gun in ther night, him havin' seen our fire. Guessing that it was some pore beggar who was bushed or in bad trouble, we paddled across ther lake an' found him half-scared to death. He lost his outfit three days since——"

"How did he come to do that?" snapped Mr. Elkington's voice.

"Ripped ther bottom out of his canoe on a snag, an' swam ashore with his gun, an' a fistful of cartridges," answered the guide glibly.

"Then we shall have to set him up with a pack of provisions to help him on his way, I suppose," said Mr. Elkington tentatively.

"That isn't what me an' Anton figgered on," replied the guide, a new note in his voice. "You can't turn a feller's brother loose in ther woods like that with winter knockin' at ther door. From ther look an' feel of things it'll snow in a day or two, and Anton an' me ain't going ter be party ter turnin' him loose. That ud be just plain murder. I reckon, boss, he's going ter come along wi' this yere outfit, or Anton an' me quits."

There was a threat in the words and a more emphatic threat in the tone in which they were spoken, and Mr. Elkington's voice, as he replied, showed that it had stung him :

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"Then quit, and the devil go with you!"

For a moment there was silence, and the girl waited breathlessly for the answer. It came with a burst of cruel laughter.

"So that's ther move, is it? Well, we'll quit, an' we'll take ther outfit with us."

"I think not," replied Mr. Elkington, a snap in his voice.

"You think not," jeered the guide. "Lor,' man, it don't matter a tinker's curse what you think. Jest take a peep behind you."

As the words reached her, Mollie Elkington leaped to her feet and peered through the tent-fly, and as she did so fear gripped her heart. Her father was standing near the fire, confronting the white guide. A little way off stood the stranger who had arrived in the night, a man with a hideously scarred face, and across the fire, with levelled rifle, stood the half-breed Anton, with a grin upon his face. She saw her father swing round swiftly; then, aware of his danger, turn and with perfect self-possession face the white guide again.

"I guess, Elkington, we hold ther trumps, an' we scoop ther pool," Montana Joe laughed in callous triumph, then gave an order. "Jest gather in his armoury, Dubosc; an' then there'll be no fear of accidents. After thet, mebbe ther fool'll talk reasonably."

And as the significance of the stranger's name broke on Mollie Elkington in a flood, she saw his scarred face wrinkle in a grin as he moved forward to disarm her father.

CHAPTER VII

MONTANA'S TERMS

WITH Anton's rifle pointing directly to his heart, Elkington knew when he was beaten, and he stood quite still, exercising all his self-control, whilst Dubosc took from him his hunting-knife and automatic pistol. He had not expected that the guides would thus early betray their treacherous purpose, and whilst the half-breed was relieving him of his weapons, he was busy wondering if, now the crisis was reached, they would demand the parchment. But for the moment that was not done; instead, Montana Joe turned his attention to his daughter.

"Yore gal has a gun, Elkington. Just tell her ter hand it out, and her rifle too. We must be perlite ter the ladies; but if there's any hanky-panky work, Jean there will let fly."

Elkington did the only thing. He walked to his daughter's tent, and thrust his hand in the flies to find Mollie standing listening.

"The trouble has come, Mollie. These blackguards——"

"I know, father. I have heard everything. I——"

"Then I think you had better hand out your pistol and rifle, according to that scoundrel's directions."

"Couldn't I shoot?" whispered the girl. "I——"

"No!" said Elkington in a peremptory voice. "It would be madness. Anton has the drop on us, and at that distance he could hit a needle. It's no use doing merely foolish things."

"It seems a tame way to yield like——"

"It's the only sane way, Mollie dear. Resistance now would mean death. We give up our guns to

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save our lives—— I am sure of that ; and if we only gain a few hours they may prove decisive ones. Pass out your weapons and keep up a good heart. We——”

“ Enough of thet palaver ! ” broke in Joe’s hoarse voice. “ Cut et short, an’ hand out ther guns.”

There was no help for it. Mollie gave her father the small pistol which she had carried at her hip, and the rifle which she had used for game, and he in turn delivered them to Jean Dubosc. Then the white guide spoke again :

“ Now just open yore ears an’ keep ’em open, Elkington, whilst I lay down the law of this camp from now on. You an’ the gal will keep away from ther guns on pain of being shot at sight if you handle ’em. That’s statoote number one. An’ number two es that I’m boss of this yere camp, an’ it’s my orders as goes an’ not yourn. Got that ? An’ number three—number three es that the gold you an’ ther gal are after belongs ter us, an’ we mean ter hev it. We’ve bin after et these ten years, more or less, an’ seein’ as how yer’ve got ther plan you’ve just gotta take us ter ther place as straight as you knows how. I could take the map from you, but I won’t, for I ain’t much of a hand with maps. An’ Jean an’ Anton ain’t scholars enough ter read their own names. So I trust you, an’ ef you behave like a sensible man would in such circumstances, we’ll load you up with a share of the dust, and turn you loose ; but if you misbehaves, well—it’ll be lead for yourself, an’ for your gal—well, I’ll leave that ter your imagination. That’s the situation, an it’ll pay you both not ter go forgettin’ it. Now what d’you say ? Es it a bargain ? ”

“ It’s a very one-sided one,” protested Elkington, with a stubborn note in his voice. “ You are forcing it on me.”

Montana Joe laughed. "When I sit in at a game, I like ter hold ther trumps; an' a bargain suffers none when one holds the gun. Guess you've jest gotta cave in, Elkington."

"You think so?" asked the other in a tone that was deliberately provocative.

"Durn it, yus! What else? If you don't, what d'you think es going ter happen ter yourself an' thet gal o' yourn? This ain't a Epworth, nor yet a Baptist tea-drinking. Take a look at Jean there. He's on the run for a killin', an' ef he hadn't neatly outwitted that blamed mounter, he'd hav been on his way ter be hanged at Edmonton. He hasn't much ter lose that ain't already mortgaged ter the law, so ter speak; an' he ain't goin' ter be too durned particular what he does. I've heard him tell tales of what he's seen done by Shamans across there in Alaska, tales that 'ud raise your hair, an' I reckon he knows a thing or two that ain't what you'd call common knowledge in Wall Street, Noo York. An' ef he gets into action with his knowledge, well——" Montana Joe broke off and glanced significantly towards the girl's tent. "No need ter remind you of ther gal, I suppose, Elkington. She's a trump card for us, an' know it jest as well as us. An' I swear that, as sure as death, if you kick, or try any Wall Street slickness, Jean has his way with her an——"

"You blackguard!"

"Mebbe!" answered Montana Joe imperturbably. "I'm not a proud feller, an' I don't set up for a saint. But you've got it straight now, an' you've jest gotta make up your mind one way or t'other. I ain't no ways particular which you takes. Either way the pool's ours; an' what's best for yourself an' the gal I guess you know without telling."

The man whom he addressed stood as if consider-

ing what he had heard. In his heart he knew that he had no choice, and his provocative words had been spoken to make Montana Joe show his hand as he had done. He knew now, beyond all question, that there was no limit to what these men would do to attain their object, and that any means, torture or worse, would be used in case of a refusal to bow to their will. He had, however, no intention of refusing, since for the moment resistance was utterly out of the question. As he had realized from the first moment of Montana's truculent action there was nothing for it but to play for time. He had not the slightest faith in the other's promises; he might or might not mean them. In his own mind he discounted them utterly, and what little hope he had was centred on the chances of something turning up. It was a slender hope enough; but for all that not one to be destroyed by overt action, or by a refusal to agree which he had no means of carrying through.

"Well?" asked the guide, after waiting a little time.

Elkington shrugged his shoulders. "Needs must when the devil drives."

Montana Joe laughed noisily. "You ain't what I'd call complimentary, Elkington; but you've got sense. An' now we've reached an understandin' I reckon this happy family might as well breakfast, an' get under way before the weather breaks, for it ain't going ter last long by the look o' things. Ef you'll just tell the gal ter hurry up, I'll be much obliged, John B."

Mr. Elkington, thus released, turned and entered his daughter's tent. He found her standing against the canvas wall, still in a listening attitude. Her face was pale, but her eyes were resolute.

"You heard?" he asked.

"Every word!"

"Then there's no need for me to explain that we're in a tight place, Mollie. But there's nothing to be gained by becoming panicky. You must keep a good heart, child."

"Oh!" replied the girl, "I'm not going to give way, dad."

Her father glanced through the opening of the tent. All three of the men outside were in view, engaged in tasks that precluded eavesdropping, and Mr. Elkington seized the opportunity offered.

"I don't trust Montana," he whispered. "If we stumble on the gold it will be—the end. We have to play for time and for a favourable opportunity to escape."

"Escape!"

As she echoed the word the girl glanced towards the lake, on which the shore-ice made a larger fringe than they had yet seen, and which had lost the brightness of yesterday, wearing instead the white look that comes with frost, and which told that mush-ice was forming. Her father understood what was in her mind and answered it.

"Hopeless at the moment, I know. But we must watch the chances. In the night, perhaps——"

He checked himself as he caught a warning flash in the girl's eyes, and turning saw Montana Joe approaching.

"Mornin', Miss Elkington," said the guide affably. "There's a rare bite in ther air this mornin'!"

"There is!" answered the girl, with a nippiness of tone that at least equalled that of the air. Then without another word she turned away.

Montana stood for a moment, as if searching his mind for something else to say. Apparently he found nothing, and then with a sudden abrupt movement

he retreated, baffled. With a man he could deal on equal terms ; but he was nonplussed by the attitude of a mere girl, who, though in his power, could so coolly flout him. He made no further attempt to approach her ; but through breakfast-time talked in low tones to his companions.

When the meal was finished, the camp was struck, the canoe loaded and launched, and they resumed their way up the lake. In the night there had been a great fall in temperature, and the rising of the sun had done little to lift it, would indeed do little in the Northern world for months to come. A steady and bitter wind from the North lifted the lake water in miniature waves which threw mush-ice on board, and, as they proceeded, the wind grew stronger and colder, whilst overhead drifted dark balloons of cloud. By noon the sky was completely overcast, and the steadily growing wind was lifting the waves to such a height that voyaging was acutely uncomfortable, if not positively dangerous, for now the canoe was overloaded to the extent represented by two-thirds of Jean Dubosc's weight. And presently the growing wind brought with it a flurry of snow-flakes, the precursors of an unusually early winter. As they drove into the face cuttingly, and like wan ghosts disappeared in the water, Montana Joe whistled aloud and looked inquiringly at Anton.

"Camp!" The half-breed answered to the wordless question. "Dere ees no oder way. Zee water eet ees swelling more an' more, an' eef zee beeg snow came we not see an' we drown."

"I guess that's about it!" agreed Montana Joe, and turned the canoe towards the shore. With the steadily rising wind growing and shrieking in the forest behind them, they pitched camp in the shelter of a high bluff, there to wait the passing of the storm.

But not until night had fallen and the moon had arisen was there any abatement of the fury of the iron wind; and when Mollie Elkington, just before retiring to rest, peeped out of her tent door it was to see the stormy moonlight gleaming on turbulent water, and shining coldly on a thin blanket of snow that spoke ominously of the winter that was marching southward in untimely haste.

When morning broke, and she left the shelter of the tent, she stepped into a frost-bound world. The wind had fallen, but it was intensely cold, and the ground under her feet rang like iron. The shore-ice had grown amazingly in the night; and the wind having swept the snow into little hollows, it remained there, the sun having apparently lost its power to melt it. The lake was still as a mirror in the now windless air, and had a forbidding look; whilst minute by minute, infinitesimally but none the less surely, the conquering ice was advancing its serrated edge, moving steadily towards the complete freeze-up.

To the girl, as she considered the landscape, the difference a single night had made in its aspect was amazing. A week ago it had been a silent, basking land; but now it wore an aspect of savage bleakness; and the powdering of snow accentuating the darkness of the pines, the floating mush-ice of the lake, the still greasy looking clouds overhead, made it positively funereal. The girl gave a little shudder as she considered it; then the voice of Montana Joe broke on her ears, giving a new turn to her thoughts.

"We've gotta gallop some ter-day. This calm ain't going ter last. Winter's jest racin' down on us, an' the Wall Street chechaquo hes gotta get us to ther place we're makin' for soon, or we'll hev ter tramp it, an' I've no fancy that way. Get ther grub goin', Jean. It's time we were paddlin' out."

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Breakfast was a hasty meal, and no time was wasted in striking camp. To launch the canoe it was necessary to break the shore-ice ; and as they did so the water froze on the axe-handles, as it froze too on the sides of the canoe and on the paddles when they came to use them. Beyond the rim of ice in the open water they came upon places where little islets of skim-ice had formed, and everywhere was cloudy mush-ice, which in a little time would freeze solid. Montana Joe pointed these things out to Mr. Elkington, and adorned them with a moral.

"For your own sake an' thet of the gal, you'll get us as straight as you can to that place you know of John B., or this ain't goin' ter be no picnic for you. Winter's comin', an' it's three weeks ahead o' ther schedule ; so ther sooner we're in quarters ther better. You don't know what the winter trail is ; but I do ; an' I tell yer thet inside a week, if we're not stabled, we'll be marching through a frozen 'ell."

To this exhortation Elkington made no reply beyond a careless nod ; and as they moved up the lake, Mollie, watching him, saw that he was noticing the shore carefully. For some time they progressed without anything noticeable occurring, then from the pine-woods came a little sougning moan, and a light breeze rippled the lake's surface.

"Sacré bleu ! Dat blasted wind," broke out Anton, "eet come again."

"Yes ! Curse it !" said Montana, looking round. "An' there's where it's comin' from ! Them hills !"

He jerked his head in the direction in which they were travelling, and as she followed the indication above the pines she caught sight of two hills white-crested thrusting themselves into the sky, two hills shaped like a woman's breasts. Instantly the description that she had quoted two nights before leaped to

her mind, and turning she whispered to her father :

" Two hills that we call the Paps of Jura ! "

" Yes ! " he answered shortly and frowned her into silence.

The hills were quite a long way off, but showed quite clearly bathed in a broad splash of light that broke through a cloud-rift. Round the tops of them were gauzy streamers.

" Blowin' like blazes up there," commented Montana Joe, as he saw where Mr. Elkington's eyes were fixed. " An' before long we'll be gettin' et down here. That smoky stuff is snow. Lord send et don't bring thet with et, or we'll be driven ter camp again, an' we've no time ter burn in daylight camps."

The girl looked at the fateful hills, wondering what her father would do ; and though from time to time she glanced at him, she could form no conjecture. His face, turned towards the distant hills, was like a mask, and there was an absent look in his eyes, as if he were lost in thought. Unable to divine his purpose and not daring to ask, she began to watch the shore closely, regardless of the rising wind which was bringing with it the discomfort of the previous day. When next she looked for the hills they were veiled from sight by a cloudy haze that seemed to move forward ; and at the same moment Montana broke out sharply :

" There's a durned blizzard blowing down from them hills."

" Oui ! " grunted Anton, " but maybe eet weel go by us ! "

But such luck was not to be theirs. The wind increased suddenly, smiting the surface of the lake with buffeting blows, flattening the waves where it struck and sending an icy spray over the occupants of the canoe, chilling them to the bone. Then in one of the gusts came the snow, a solid sheet that passed

and left them coated in whiteness. Mollie Elkington gasped for breath as she lifted her head when the scurry had passed, and looked shorewards. The hills were not to be seen. Most of the landscape was hidden and the rest of it was being swiftly obliterated as if some giant hand were dragging a dark curtain across it. The wind suddenly roared again, and through it she heard Montana Joe bawling orders in a savage voice.

The nose of the canoe turned shorewards. The dark curtain of snow spreading over the land obliterated everything except the immediate foreground, and soon that vanished in a smother of driving flakes, before which she perforce bent her head. But even as she did so she caught sight of a break in the contour of the lake, where a river, quarter of a mile from bank to bank, emptied itself. It was no more than a glimpse that was afforded her, and then it was hidden in the snow-wrack, but through the wrack her mind visioned those breast-like hills that must have revealed themselves in majesty had there been sunshine instead of snow. She glanced hastily at her father, and, as his eyes met hers, knew that he also had seen the river.

Whether Montana Joe and his companions had observed the river she did not know. Anyway, as she told herself, it could have no significance for them ; and a moment or two later, as they came into the shelter of a bastion rock which thereabouts formed the lake bank, she knew that they had left the river behind. In the shelter of the bastion, screened from the blizzard hurtling overhead and yet half-smothering them with a fine powder of snow, they crept along until the bastion ended and they found a small bay backed by tall woods now roaring in the gale. It offered a camping ground, though the snow whirled everywhere about it, and Montana headed the canoe

for the shore. It took them twenty minutes to reach it, the last score of yards being made by chopping the ice with axes. Just as they landed, Mollie Elkington cannoned against her father.

"The river," said she, "you saw it?"

"Yes," he answered briefly.

"You will not tell them?"

"No!"

Then together they hurried forward to help to make the camp that would save them from death.

CHAPTER VIII

THROUGH THE SNOW

IT wanted yet two hours to midnight on the third day following his arrival at the dead trapper's cabin, when Terence Clancy stepped to the door and looked out into the night. He could see nothing, and a smother of snow with the wind behind it speedily drove him back to shelter. For thirty-two hours the wind had raged and the snow had fallen without ceasing, and it still continued making travel utterly impossible. He had heard the snow swish against the cabin walls in heavy flakes, and again had listened to the tattoo made by hard shot-like snow which had he been out in it would have cut the face like so many particles of ice. He knew that outside it was swirling and drifting into strange windrows, filling the hollows, making deep drifts where bushes or fallen trees caught and held it, and driving all living things to shelter from its freezing breath.

He looked round the cabin, gratefully. The dead trapper was no longer in the corner where death had overtaken him, and the corner itself was now bare of the bunk where the mummified body had lain; for

within an hour of his arrival he had buried the dead man in a shallow grave, and had used the bunk to feed the stove, the ruddy glow of which now filled the cabin with cheerful light, revealing a small sledge standing against the wall of the hut, which vehicle he glanced at from time to time with eyes in which was a light of satisfaction. In demolishing the bunk he had found the sledge stowed away underneath, and though at first he had thought little of the discovery, since the beginning of the great storm it had afforded him intense satisfaction. He guessed that the driving snow falling in the freezing lake would almost certainly close it for travelling by canoe ; but in the sled he saw the means that would enable him to take up once more the trail of Jean Dubosc and of the man who, if the half-breed was to be believed, knew more of his father's disappearance than did Dubosc himself.

That it would be but one trail he would need to follow he was convinced. The half-breed had gone off in company with Elkington's guides, no doubt for the time being to become a member of the expedition, and he had little doubt that where one trail was there was the other also. The possibility of that rejoiced his heart ; for whilst he burned to secure his quarry again, he desired ardently to demand an explanation from Mr. Elkington. For a moment it crossed his mind that possibly he had been mistaken in his reading of the situation that the American was being exploited by his guides, and that instead they were working together. A second later, however, the thought was dismissed. The words which he had overheard, with Dubosc's plain statement about the gold-mine, precluded any possibility of that. There were two parties in the Elkington camp, and, all unaware of the fact, Elkington was the stalking-horse

for his guides and for the murderer who was in collusion with them.

Quite suddenly the remembrance of Mollie Elkington came to him. If his reading of the situation was the correct one, as he did not question, grave danger menaced her, for the men with her father were unscrupulous, and the addition of Jean Dubosc to the party did nothing to lessen the menace. As he visioned her as he had seen her in the moonlight, on the night of their meeting, the dark eyes flashing indignantly in her beautiful face, he felt anew the bitterness that he had previously felt, but this time it was instantly checked. Until he knew more, whatever he might think about her father, he had no right to condemn her. And she moved all unconsciously in the shadow of peril. The thought of what her fate might be at the hands of the unscrupulous trio disturbed him profoundly, and, as he reflected on the possibilities, acute anxiety surged in the place of the bitterness he had felt, and her welfare assumed a place in his mind above his purpose to recapture Dubosc and his desire to wrest an explanation from her father. At all costs he must save her from the dark peril which enveloped her.

But for the moment he could do nothing. Whilst the storm held he was tied to the cabin. To attempt to travel in such weather would be mere madness; for, as he knew quite well, he could not march half a mile without being overcome by the snow and the bitter cold. As he reflected upon that he found only one consoling thought, and that was that if he could not take the trail neither could the men whom he desired so ardently to overtake. They also would be storm-bound, and if in the meantime they proceeded to no overt action, with a great effort it might still be possible for him to come up with them in time

One thing, however, he could do, and that was to prepare himself for the strenuous effort the situation would demand, by taking all the rest he could secure whilst the storm continued. Deliberately following that policy, he wrapped himself in a rabbit-skin robe which had belonged to the dead trapper, and throwing himself on a bed of balsam that he had prepared, endeavoured to sleep.

It was long before the slumber he wooed came to him ; but when it did he slept soundly as a child, and after some hours awoke to find the fire almost dead. Except for the faint glow of the dying ashes the cabin was in complete darkness, and rising quickly he threw a dry stick or two into the stove, waited until they crackled into flame, and then looked at his watch. It registered ten minutes to seven, and, in spite of the darkness, he knew that it must be morning.

He stood listening for a moment or two, but heard no sound beyond the crackle of the sticks. Apparently the storm had blown itself out whilst he slept ; and with hopeful anticipation in his heart, he moved to the door and looked out.

The storm was indeed over. Overhead the sky was like a steel vault picked out with the burnished points of stars. The lake was no longer a dark mirror. As far as he could see by the stellar light it presented a white face of snow. Snow was heaped against the cabin wall, burdened the tall pines and blanketed the whole Northern world. The wind had ceased. An eerie silence brooded over the landscape, a silence which was broken by a sudden sharp sound like the snap of a pistol. The staccatoed sound, occasioned as Clancy knew by the bursting of some tree's frozen heart, told of intense cold ; a cold which bit like fire on the hands and face, driving the corporal back into

the shelter of the cabin, where he instantly began to prepare for the journey which the passing of the storm had made possible.

It was an hour and a half later when, wearing over his own clothing the fur parka which had belonged to the dead trapper, with the latter's rifle slung over his shoulder, he harnessed himself to the little sled laden with stores. Then he slipped on a pair of snowshoes, took one look at the friendly cabin which he was forsaking and started on his hazardous way.

It was no easy trail. In spite of the intense cold, the newly fallen snow had no crust worth speaking of, and at every step the webbed shoe sank in the soft snow until the surface of the latter was almost level with the knee ; and from this position the foot had to be lifted until it was clear of the surface, and only thus, by what was really violent exertion, could a single foot of the way be won. But Clancy was strong, and hampered though he was by the sled, he made steady progress along the lake-side, until he came to the valley, round which the muskeg had previously compelled him to make a detour. Now it showed a level stretch of uniform whiteness, broken only by the black-looking boughs of scattered bushes which had not held the snow. He had no fear of the place now ; for he knew that the frost must by this have penetrated deep, making the bog firm as a macadamized road, and he set himself to cross it without a second's hesitation.

On the farther side he halted to rest himself for a moment, and to throw back the fur hood of his parka. His breath as it was expelled was instantly frozen, settling in an icy rime on his moustache and eyebrows and stubble beard, and causing him no little inconvenience and indeed downright discomfort—discomfort from which there could be no deliverance

so long as he kept the trail. The halt was but a short one, a mere breathing space that he dared not lengthen ; for, bitter cold though it was, his exertions had induced a perspiration that, if he were not careful, might be followed by a chill that would prove utterly disastrous to his purpose, if not to himself.

Facing the North, with its cold menace, he toiled on again. The day broke wanly, but, as the sun made its brief appearance above the southern horizon, brightened suddenly, kindling the myriad snow crystals into fairy jewellery, and bringing an uplift to his spirits. Labouring steadily, allowing himself only such rests as sheer necessity compelled, he travelled until noon ; then, well in the shelter of the wood, he built a small fire, and prepared himself a meal of beans and hot tea, sprinkling the beans with sugar, in lieu of better flavouring. It was poor fare for the Arctic wilderness where nature demands fats and oils ; but it had to suffice ; and he ate the improvised dish with a relish, the while he told himself that soon he must find game and so add to his larder.

At the end of an hour he harnessed himself to the sled once more, and resumed his way. As he did so he was conscious of aching leg muscles, and then of an acute pain which thrust through his groin like a flame and gripped the muscles of his calves, and the ankle tendons as if with steel pincers.

" *Mal de racquette !* " he groaned to himself, but set his teeth and kept on.

Fortunately the pain, which ordinarily might have meant a day or two's frightful torture and which is a complaint often attacking the snow-shoe traveller at the beginning of the season, passed away in an hour or two, largely owing to the fact that he was in perfect condition, with muscles that were hard as iron. Even when the pain recurred for a spell, he refused to halt,

but trudged along the heart-breaking trail with only the creaking of the sled-runners and the crunching of the snow-shoes to break the intense silence.

The sun slid down the southern heavens out of sight, and the gloom and shadow of Arctic twilight settled upon the landscape, yet still he kept on, a figure solitary beyond words among the immensities amid which he moved, frail yet indomitable in the face of inimical forces, undaunted by the silent but ever-present menace of the North. The long twilight was giving place to the longer night ; and somewhere in the woods there was that sound of savage predatory life, the howl of wolves on the meat-trail, when he decided to camp, and carefully selected a place where his fire would be hidden from anyone farther up the lake.

Whilst he was so engaged he startled a big snow-shoe rabbit, and had the luck to hit it with a deftly-thrown axe, so providing himself with meat to go with the pot of beans that was presently aboil. Then when he had fixed a blanket screen to throw back the heat of the fire, whilst his supper was cooking he made his way down to the lake-side.

The dense night had fallen. Overhead the stars burned brilliantly, but with a light that was hard and cold as that of diamonds. The moon was not yet risen, and the farther side of the lake was a mere pit of blackness. But he stared into the pit carefully, his eyes ranging now south, now north until they found what they sought, which was a ruddy point of light far away in the north, a point of light that by the novice might easily have been mistaken for a star lying low in the horizon. Clancy, however, did not fall into that mistake. In that glowing point there was a quality of light far different from the hard light of the other glowing points which filled the vast

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concave above him. There was a softness in the ruddy glow which suggested warmth as the hard diamond points of starlight did not ; and he knew that the point which he watched represented a camp-fire, and that beyond all question the camp-fire of the man whom he was pursuing.

He considered it a little while, stamping his feet in the snow to keep them from freezing ; and whilst he remained there, staring at the camp on the farther shore, above the tree-tops across the lake sailed the moon, like a single, austere eye, set in the vast heavens, with nothing warm or friendly in the chill regard. It lit the world, but with a light so cold that it made the beholder shiver ; and as the chill beams bathed the opposite shore in frosty light, Clancy made one attempt to discern the outline of the distant camp, then realizing the utter vanity of the attempt, laughed suddenly, and fled abruptly to his own camp-fire. When he reached it, he kicked up the fire, saw that his supper was cooking nicely, and then gave himself up to thought.

The men up the lake could not know that he was on their trail. By this time Dubosc and his friends would be sure that he had perished ; and was lying a frozen corpse, waiting for the advent of hunger-driven wolves. That was all to the good, making as it did for his own security, and their unconsciousness of his pursuit would make it possible for him to approach the Elkington camp unobserved. But the width of the lake lay between them ; and though the lake seemed to have frozen solid, he knew that as yet the ice would be too treacherous a bridge for him to dream of crossing. Two days, three days more, and it might be possible to venture ; and until then he would have to exercise patience, following a trail parallel to that of the men across the lake, and waiting

for the favourable moment to cross. That he decided would have to be done in the night, whilst his enemies slept, since, however careless they might be, in the daytime they could scarcely fail to observe the figure of a man hauling a sled across the white expanse, and in that event would almost certainly proceed to investigate.

As he thought of the unavoidable delay, and reflected on the position of Mollie Elkington, again he was conscious of acute apprehension. His duty as a member of the Mounted Police called on him to intervene at the earliest possible moment; but the anxiety that he felt was of an altogether personal nature. From the first moment of their exciting meeting he had been conscious of interest in the girl; and though Dubosc's startling story had kindled a feeling of bitterness towards her, he was now inclined to question if the girl knew the details of the story of his father's disappearance as they must be known to Elkington himself.

"In any case," he muttered as he stared into the fire, "I have got to save her from those brutes. The man who murdered Wagush is not the man in whose hands a helpless white girl may be left up here."

After a little time he bestirred himself, ate his supper, and before making himself comfortable for the night, made his way once more to the lake-side, and stared towards the place where the red point glowed, measuring the distance.

"Seven or eight miles," he calculated aloud, between him and it. "If I start betimes in the morning, I should draw level with them at noon, if they don't move on. If I only had dogs——"

He broke off sharply as a thought occurred to him. He knew nothing about any arrangements that might have been made by the Elkington expedition. If at

some point dogs had been bespoken, there was a risk that they might draw ahead of him before he could come up with them. The thought troubled him a good deal until he remembered that winter had swooped from the North earlier than anyone would have been likely to anticipate ; so that if Elkington had arranged for dogs, it would be at some point yet far away.

Consoling himself with that reflection, he returned to the fire, and after building it up for the night and making what preparations he could for an early start in the morning, he turned in, and, tired with the exertion the day had demanded, fell asleep almost instantly. For some hours he slept without moving, and then turned over and opened his eyes. The fire had died down, and the moon had dipped out of sight, but the cold fires of the Aurora flung great ribbons of light across the sky, with a faint crackling sound. But in those mighty streamers there was nothing of the friendliness that appertained to the glowing light of his own fire, the Aurora embodying the spirit of the North, cold, inimical, full of menace. It was not a new phenomenon in Clancy's experience. He had seen it many times in the two winters which he had spent in the inhospitable Arctic land ; but familiarity in no way softened the awe it awakened ; and for the time that the display continued he lay there watching it, thinking how small a thing was man set in the midst of such elemental forces as the North incarnated. Not till the faint rustling crackle was silent, and the last streamer had died from the zenith, did his interest cease. And then with the restoration of the friendly darkness he slipped once more into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER IX

ATTEMPTED FLIGHT

IN the sheltered place to which they had been driven by the storm, Elkington, his daughter and the treacherous guides abode two whole days without any attempt to resume the journey. One event significant of the changed relationship of the parties had befallen the moment the camp was pitched, and that was the annexation of the larger tent by the three adventurers ; announced by Montana Joe in characteristic fashion.

" Guess I'm boss of ther outfit now, Elkington ; an' as boss I'm entitled to ther boss's home-comforts, I reckon. The gal'll have ter spread her purtecting wings over you, an' be thankful thet et ain't one of us thet hungers for ther shelter of her tabernacle."

Mr. Elkington had made no demur to an arrangement that he was powerless to prevent, and which as a matter of fact he rather welcomed, since it gave him the opportunity of converse with his daughter that was not possible under the old arrangement. But as he crept into the girl's tent it was with no elation, but with an extreme depression of spirit which his daughter could not but note.

" What is it, father ? Has something untoward happened ? "

Mr. Elkington shook his head. " Only the weather ! If it keeps on, we can't possibly use the canoe again, and flight that way becomes impossible."

Mollie Elkington did not attempt to question the rightness of that conclusion. She knew that it was indeed as her father said, but she refused to dwell on the gloomy aspect of things or to give up hope.

" There are other ways, father," she said cheerfully.

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"What other ways?" demanded Mr. Elkington.

"Well, we might be able to steal a rifle and axe and ammunition and take to the woods."

"To die miserably of cold and starvation."

"No!" she answered promptly. "Not of starvation. There is game in these woods. I saw a moose cow and a yearling calf on the bank yesterday."

"But we are unversed in the ways of the wilderness, whilst those blackguards know them from A to Z. The fellows would follow us, and we could not possibly hope to evade them. Our only hope of cutting ourselves off from them lay in the canoe, and that this early winter weather has destroyed."

He sat staring into vacancy, visioning terrible things that might be in store for them, and more concerned with the possible fate of his daughter than with himself, and then Mollie broke on his gloomy thoughts:

"But we've just got to beat them, dad; and things are not quite as bad as they look. These men know that we are inexperienced in the ways of the wilderness; and they will count on us being afraid to run away into the woods; and that will make them careless. When the storm blows out our opportunity will come, perhaps, and if it does we must use it. Risks don't come into the question much, since there are risks both ways, and it's merely a choice of which set of risks we are prepared to face. I'm for the woods, snow and winter notwithstanding. It is better than waiving on the will of these treacherous scoundrels; and if we can get possession of an axe and a rifle with a few provisions, the sooner we break from them the better. We may have to spend sometime up here; but other people have done it; and there is always the chance of meeting with friendly Indians. Anyhow, black as things are, there is no need to despair over them yet. Since one avenue of escape is closed,

we must just look for another. That is plain sense."

"Yes," agreed Elkington in a gloomy tone which revealed that depression still had him in its grip. "Yes! but where we are to find it I don't know. To take to the woods, for you and me will be a desperate expedient."

"And to remain with these men will be even more desperate, for they are not likely to suffer either of us to return to civilization once they have got what they want."

"No," agreed her father. "Desperate as flight is in such a wilderness, it is the only way."

"Then we must take it, as and when we can, since the alternative is worse." She forced a laugh that, however, had no mirth behind it. "As a pair of Arctic Crusoes we may do much better than you seem to anticipate, dad."

"Possibly!" admitted Mr. Elkington, in a voice which, however, was without hope. "We can only pray for the opportunity to try."

That opportunity, however, lingered in its coming. For two days it was almost impossible to venture outside the tent; and when at last the weather cleared, it revealed a world all white and frozen, with not a single foot of open water visible on the lake's surface; and as they sat at breakfast in a bitterly cold dawn, the voice of Montana Joe drifted to them across the fire.

"Say, boys, 'ere's a 'ell of a mess. The lake's froze up; an' we ain't a sled or a dog ter tote the outfit along. What are we goin' ter do about et?"

"Mak' one sledge, an' harness zee man an' zee girl to haul eet," said Dubosc with a brutal chuckle.

"Or hunt round an' fin' dogs," said Anton. "Zee Indians, dey weel hav' dogs——"

"Indians!" Montana Joe broke in contemptuously. "Whar are they? Jest take a glimpse round this durned landscape an' see if you can see any tepees smoking. I'll bet ther outfit that there ain't an Indian inside two hundred miles. We're off their stampin' ground up here; an' a thunderin' sight nearer Esquimoo igloos than Indian tepees."

"Parbleu!" cried Anton in a great voice, rising suddenly to his feet, his hand outstretched. "But all zee same dere are dogs."

"What in thunder——" began Montana, and then checked himself, as looking in the direction in which the half-breed pointed he saw what Anton had already seen. "Jumping Moses," he cried, with wonder on his face. "A dog train."

"Oui," answered the half-breed, "an' with one leetle mans, just one leetle mans."

In his tones there was a significance which betrayed the direction of his thoughts. There, far away across the snowy waste, skirting the edge of the lake, were the dogs and sled they needed, to be had for the mere taking.

Montana Joe, his forehead puckered in a frown, stared at the five black dots with the larger one ahead crawling along the open shore.

"I wonder who ther blighter ees!" he said thoughtfully.

"*Le diable!*" cried Dubosc. "What dat matter? Anton say truth. He ees just one leetle man; an' dere are dogs—for zee takings."

Montana Joe still stared at the moving dots, and it was clear that he was considering the course which his companions were advocating. The frown deepened, a covetous gleam came into his eyes as he watched the distant dog train, then suddenly he addressed the half-breeds:

"There ain't no mining camps up here?"

"Non! Non!" answered Anton.

"Then there's no fear of miners' meetin' an' miners' law, administered with a rope an' a tree—an' we jest must hev dogs. One of us must go and drive a bargain with ther owner of that team. Not ter do et ud be jest a simple waste of a providential opportunity."

"Drive a bargain," laughed Jean Dubosc. "You mean dat we pay for zee team? Montana, you are vaire jocular. Send Anton an' me together, an' we weel pay. Ho! Ho! we weel pay or not pay, but we weel zee dogs bring back with us."

Montana Joe looked at the other half-breed. "You will go, Anton?"

"But yees, Montana, eef Jean he go too."

"Then that's settled, an' ther sooner you're off ther better." He stood watching the apparently crawling figure of the man and the dogs for a moment, then he spoke again. "Ther feller's followin' ther shore an' makin' round thet big bend. Ef you go through ther woods an' over ther hill thar you ought to come up with him in a couple of hours."

"Oui!" replied Dubosc, with a brutal laugh. "Nevaire fear. We weel overtak' heem."

Within ten minutes the desperadoes started on their piratical errand; and when they were swallowed up in the snow-covered woods, Montana turned to Mr. Elkington. "I guess I'll do a bit of explorin'. There ought ter be a moose-yard somewhere round here, et's jest ther place. An' while I'm gone, you an' ther gal can set ther camps ter right an' boil ther beans an' bacon for dinner. When them two comes back they'll be famished as like as not."

As he spoke a sudden light of hope leaped in Mollie Elkington's eyes. The chance that she and her father desired was to be given them, after all. It was only

with an effort that she refrained from looking triumphantly at her father, who of purpose replied grumblingly : " Need's must, I suppose. But some day you'll pay for this piece of foolishness, Montana."

" Mebbe ! " the other laughed back. " But I'll take ther risk."

He disappeared in the tent which he and his companions had annexed, and remained there some little time. When he emerged he was dressed for the woods, and carried a rifle in his hand.

" I'll be back in an hour or mebbe two," he said, and then with a nod marched off up the lake-side in the direction of the river. In three minutes a spur of wood hid him from view, and then Mollie Elkington gave a little skip of delight.

" Now's our chance, dad ; we——"

Her father lifted a warning finger, and whispered quickly : " Steady, Mollie, this may be a trap. Montana is no fool. Wait a few minutes until we know that he has really gone."

Scarcely able to repress her excitement, the girl waited until some minutes more had elapsed, and watched whilst her father crept to the point of the woods where Montana had disappeared from view. She saw him standing behind a tree whilst he reconnoitred, and as she caught his signal ran forward and joined him. Then, herself concealed behind a second tree, she looked down the lake. The figure of Montana Joe, black against the snow, was steadily receding.

" He is going," she whispered excitedly. " He is really going."

" I believe he is," answered her father, himself a little shaken by excitement. " We are to have our chance, after all."

Together they hurried back to the camp, and as they reached it Mr. Elkington spoke in a hard voice :

"Get the rifles, Mollie, and load them, whilst I make up a couple of packs. If Montana returns before we are off, I shall shoot him at sight."

The girl nodded her approval of this course, and turning disappeared in the tent which the desperadoes had occupied. A minute later her father caught a sharp cry of distress, and as he hurried towards the tent to learn what had occasioned it, his daughter emerged with a look of tragic disappointment on her beautiful face.

"What is it?" asked Elkington quickly. "Aren't the rifles——"

"Yes! But they're quite useless. The breechbolts are missing."

The man swore under his breath, then he nodded. "We might have expected something of the sort. Montana is as cunning as a fox. He has taken them with him in order to dish any attempt to use them on our part."

"But he shan't prevent our attempt to get away. There's food here, more than we can carry, and an axe; and there are tons of matches. We must be like Montana—take our risk."

"It is a very grave one," said her father. "We may lose ourselves in the woods; we may starve——"

"Yes; and if we stay here, what will happen?"

"God knows!"

"You don't believe that Montana Joe will do what he promised? You don't believe that if we lead him to the place where the gold is, he will let us go?"

"No," answered her father. "He daren't do that. He knows quite well that if we won out we should inform the authorities, who would set the Mounted Police to run him and these other blackguards to earth."

"Then the woods are the smaller risk. On the

one hand there is certain death at the hands of those brutes, and on the other the risk from cold and snow and hunger——”

“We’ll go!” cried her father suddenly. “It is the one chance we are likely to have. We will take it; and may Heaven help us!” He returned to the stores and made a rapid selection, which he made into two packs, one weighing about sixty and the other forty pounds. These he arranged with the straps that were part of the outfit; and in something less than half an hour they were ready to start. Then with the packs in place they faced the woods.

“We will make a traverse across to the river we passed,” he said, as he led the way. “And we will go as fast as we can for the first few miles. It will be difficult work. Darkness will come quickly in the woods, and the further we are before its coming the better the ultimate chance of escape.”

They pushed on with speed under the snow-laden pines. The wintry sun scarcely penetrated the recesses, and they moved in a gloom and silence that was most oppressive to the spirit; whilst very soon the burden of the packs began to tell on their unaccustomed backs and shoulders. The deep snow, into which they sank at every step, made the going difficult; and after a little time, in spite of the intense cold, they were both perspiring freely; whilst Mr. Elkington’s breath came pantingly, and he was forced to slacken the pace, and after a time to halt, and rest.

When they resumed it was at a steadier pace, and through the gloom and silence they marched on, neither disposed to speech, all their breath being needed for their unaccustomed endeavours. After an hour and a half steady marching, steering by a compass which Mr. Elkington had carried all the way from the Landing, they came to a break in the woods

where a long barren, three-quarters of a mile across, stretched itself between the wood from which they were emerging and the next timber line. The man eyed it doubtfully. The snow, as he saw, was deep ; and the crossing, encumbered as they were with packs and without the help of snow-shoes, would be difficult. He explained the situation to the girl, and added : " But there's nothing else for it. We must cross into the next woods."

" Then let us go ! " replied his daughter.

The journey across the barren was even worse than had been anticipated. The frozen crust broke through at every step, and with every move forward the man moving ahead sank to the waist, and Mollie following behind, was in little better case. After tremendous toil, utterly exhausted, the sweat of their endeavours frozen to ice upon eyebrows, eyelashes and hair, they reached the first timber on the further side at the end of two hours ; and as they did so, Mr. Elkington sank on a fallen tree, and slipped his pack.

" I can't go another yard, Mollie. We must make a fire and have a meal and a rest."

" Yes," answered Mollie, herself at the point of exhaustion. " That will be the best thing to do."

" An' I'll jine you, if you've no objection."

At the first words, exhausted though he was, Mr. Elkington leaped to his feet and looked hastily round. At the first glance he saw no one, then in the shadow of a tall spruce he beheld a man standing with levelled rifle. It was Montana Joe. As he made the recognition a little groan came from Elkington's lips, and at the same moment, half-fainting, his daughter collapsed on the fallen tree. Himself almost overcome, her father slipped down to support her ; and seeing that there was to be no resistance, Montana Joe lowered

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his rifle, and advanced towards them, a grin wrinkling his face.

"Waal," he said, as he looked at them. "You two babes in ther wood seem ter have pushed it ter the limit ; but thar's no need to hurry now. I guess we'll hev that grub you was talkin' of an' then git back ter camp, before ther dark falls."

He waited, but there was no response from the victims of his villainy, and after a moment he spoke again.

"Bit of a surprise meetin' me, I reckon ; an' you're too overjoyed ter talk. I kin understand that ; an' I guess we'll take ther talk for granted. But we're bound ter have a fire an' some grub an' hot tea, or I'll never git you two poor helpless kids back ter camp ; so just bustle about an' find some sticks, Elkington, whilst I get ther pot ready. The gal will come round ef you'll jest leave her alone. Ef she don't I'll see ef I can be of any assistance."

"Mr. Elkington did not move. For the moment in the bitterness of his disappointment, he was beyond caring for Montana Joe or anything he might do. The renegade guide waited, then he spoke again in a peremptory voice :

"Jump, you fool ! Can't you see ther gal will freeze ef we don't get a fire going an' pour some bilin' tea into her ? "

This was a new aspect of things to the man whom he addressed, and recognizing the truth of the words, Elkington whispered in his daughter's ear, and rising from the tree began to hunt for dead sticks that would afford kindling wood. For her part, overwhelmed by the failure of their attempt to escape, the girl bent her face in her mittened hands, and so remained for a time, unconscious of the cold, a figure of utter despair. From time to time, whilst Mr. Elkington and he worked,

the renegade glanced at her thoughtfully, and when the tea was ready he poured out a mugful and carried it to her.

"Drink it!" he said as the girl looked up.

"I don't want——"

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly. "You'll freeze ef you don't, an' leave ther old man all on his lonesome."

A flash came in the girl's eyes as she took the mug. "How I hate you!"

Montana Joe laughed easily. "That's neither here nor there, an' when I want ter know your feelings towards me, I'll ask. But all ther same you an' ther old man hev got ter take my orders. An' just now them orders es eat an' drink, even ef you don't feel merry. An' quick's ther word, for we must hit ther camp before dark. Et's no use sulkin' thar like a puling babe."

The renegade's words did nothing to allay the bitterness of the girl's disappointment; but they stung her pride, and that was to the good, since it helped her to brace herself for the inevitable. When her father brought her food, she ate it without demur, and at the conclusion of the hasty meal, whilst the packs were being done up, began to pace to and fro in an endeavour to fight off the stiffness that was already developing as a consequence of the violent exertions of the morning.

When they were ready for starting, Montana looked at the two packs, and from them to the girl, then he slung one of them on his own shoulders, and indicating the other with his rifle, he addressed her father.

"Pick up that, Elkington. You brought et an' I reckon you've just gotta take et back." And when Mr. Elkington had placed the pack in position he spoke again: "You'll lead an' keep a steady pace going."

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You'll hev sense enough ter follow yore own trail, an' I needn't tell yer which'll be the easiest thing ter do. I'll bring up ther rear, an' you'll keep off tricks, or by ther livin' Jupiter I'll blow a hole through you. Now march ! "

And in this way, exhausted, bone-tired, and with despair in their hearts, the fugitives returned to the camp from which they had fled. It was almost dark, and the first stars were showing in the steely sky when they came in sight of the tents. A great fire was burning and silhouetted against its red glow were the figures of the two half-breeds.

" Jean and Anton are back seemingly," commented Montana to the girl's unresponsive figure. " I guess they'll have missed you."

A second later a sudden clamour of yelping huskies broke on the stillness, occasioned no doubt by the approach of the trio ; and as he heard it the renegade guide laughed triumphantly :

" By glory, they've got ther dogs."

CHAPTER X

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR

THE stars were yet in the sky, and the terrific silence of the White North, unbroken by the movement of any other living creature, brooded over the frozen lake and the snow-laden woods, when Terence Clancy harnessed himself to the sled and once more pulled out on his adventurous trail. Hope was strong within him. With the least good fortune, the end of the day's march would see him opposite the Elkington camp, in a strategic position for further action. That thought was an inspiration, so much so that almost automatically his pace

quicken; and he found himself moving at a rate that must soon exhaust his strength. With a little laugh, he checked himself, moving forward very deliberately, determined to use himself as sparingly as possible, that the end of the day might find him with a reserve of strength.

For three hours after breaking camp, he moved in the starlit darkness, or in the dim twilight which heralded the coming of the short day. It was a ghostly world through which he marched, head down and shoulders inclined forward. The pale snow was everywhere, on the earth, the frozen lake, and the trees, even the trunks of the latter being plastered with it. The creaking of the snow-shoes and the crunch of the sled-runners were the only sounds, save when a frozen tree cracked in the forest; and these things served but to accentuate the terrific silence. Accustomed though he was to solitude, the utter stillness got on his nerves a little. The sounds of his own progress were like an intrusion in a world of the dead.

But with the coming of the cold sun, these feelings evaporated; and he knew that other beings besides himself were moving in this hushed world. He came on tracks in the snow, here a place where a big lynx had waited for some unlucky snow-shoe rabbit, there the trail of a marten, and a little further on the track of a cunning fisher. Twice he caught sight of ermines, and once a fox, observing him coming, slid away like a shadow between the trees. The fur animals, hunted to their lairs by the storm, after a two days' fast, were now driven forth by hunger to range for food, and their presence in a world that had seemed dead as the cold moon cheered him wonderfully.

He himself needed food—meat to go with the flour and beans which he had in plenty; and, as he marched it was with open eyes and ears, for, as he knew, the

larger game would now be abroad, seeking to stay the pangs of hunger. Moose or caribou was the game for which he watched, alert always, as he marched forward dragging the sledge behind him. Sooner or later he must discover them if they did not discover him first, and his rifle was thrust in the sled-lashings ready for quick action when the necessity arose.

That, however, was not for some time. Once indeed a grey form loomed up between the trees, and for a second he visioned a pair of caribou horns, and two eyes that met his own with curious stare. Before he could reach his rifle, however, the beast seemed to melt ghost-like in the dim woods. He made no attempt to follow it ; for, as he knew, the caribou being one of the most elusive of wilderness beasts, to attempt to stalk it would be to follow a long and baffling trail.

Half an hour later good fortune came to him. Moving along the lake-side well in the shadow of the trees, watchful always, he came suddenly upon a path running through the wood, a path marked clearly by the sharp hoofs of moose. A glance at the nearest trees showed where the bark had been freshly nibbled, and in a moment he had thrown off the sled trappings, slipped his feet out of the snow-shoes, and rifle in hand was moving silently under the shadowing trees. A slight wind rustled through the trees and he faced it, as he knew the moose would ; and presently he reached a place where another track crossed the one that he was following. Beyond all question he had stumbled on a moose-yard, one of those great mazes of paths made by the herded moose when the snow comes, a maze often many miles long, with the paths criss-crossing in a most astounding tangle. Along these paths the great beasts, unable to move far in the deep snows, feed through the winter, nibbling the twigs and bark of the trees on either side, and so maintaining life

when otherwise they would perish in the six-foot snows. He examined the tracks where they crossed carefully. On the new path there were hoof-marks so fresh that the frost crystals had not yet had time to form, and slipping like a shadow from tree to tree up-wind, he followed the new path.

He did not go very far. Twenty yards further on he heard a snap, and then a sudden startled grunt, and in the same instant became aware of a young bull moose, accompanied by a couple of cows and a yearling calf, not fifteen yards away. The beasts had seen him and were already on the run when he slipped to his knees and, sighting for the bull, fired. The great beast staggered and went to his knees; but two seconds later was up again. Before he could follow the fleeing cows, Clancy fired a second time, and in that shot the bull found his death. The corporal moved forward, rejoicingly; and as he stood for a moment surveying his kill, voiced his thought aloud:

"All the meat I want and more."

The dead moose represented at least eight hundred pounds of food, much more than he could possibly drag away; and after making two journeys to the sledge with something over a hundred pounds of meat, he was constrained to leave the bulk.

He looked at the great head with its wide-spreading palmated antlers, and was conscious of a pang of remorse.

"I'm sorry, old boy," he said, "but it's the law of tooth and fang, life to the fittest."

He turned away. Soon the foxes and the wolves or the smaller fur dwellers in the wild would find the carcase, and the silent forest would be full of snarling sounds as they fell to feasting, or disputed with each other over this great treasure of meat.

When he harnessed himself anew to the sled, he

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moved forward at a slower pace. He had more than doubled the burden behind him, and to that extent added to his task ; but he was content, for the burden meant life in circumstances where all natural forces conspired against it, at least so far as man was concerned. Moving steadily forward, avoiding obstacles, and as far as possible keeping out of view of the open lake, he journeyed till noon, and then in the recesses of the wood lit a small fire, chopped a steak from the meat which was already frozen solid, and cooked it on a small stick in front of the fire, eating with it beans that he had cooked at his last camp.

After an hour's rest, feeling much refreshed, he moved to the lake-side, and carefully reconnoitred the opposite shore. The wintry sun already moving downward towards the southern horizon, lit the further side of the lake with cold light ; and he stared intently at the long line of sombre woods with their white pall of snow. Creek by creek, bay by bay, inlet by inlet, he followed the line running along the lake shore, and then came on two dark splashes on the snow, from near which drifted a column of smoke. His heart leaped at the sight. He knew that those dark patches were the green rot-proof tents of the Elkington camp, and he examined it as carefully as was possible, noting the contours of the shore where it was pitched.

At the point where he stood the lake narrowed, being not more than two and a half miles from bank to bank, with a small island crowned with spruce, about a third of the way across. The camp itself was pitched a mile or so further north where the lake widened again. As he took stock of the situation, he decided that a little above where he stood would be the best place at which to attempt a crossing, since there the ice was likely to be stronger, and there would be the island to make for in case of accidents.

Stare as he would, he could see no signs of moving figures in the neighbourhood of the camp, a fact which puzzled him a little, since against the white snow such figures, had there been any, must have been clearly visible to eyes as keen as his own.

"Must be resting in the tents," he thought aloud. "Probably had a bad time in the storm."

His eyes roved further up the lake towards a point where it turned in a great curve. Then suddenly he froze into absolute stillness, his gaze fixed on the tall bluff at the inner side of the bend. Round the base of it seven black dots were moving all in line, two of them larger than the rest.

"A dog train!" he ejaculated in a startled whisper. "Who——" He did not finish the question. That dog train travelling in the direction of the camp stirred fresh apprehensions within him, and kindled a sense of the need for haste. If those dogs were part of the Elkington outfit, or had been acquired for it, either of which alternatives was exceedingly likely, then with their coming it was probable that the expedition would shortly be moving on, in all likelihood on the following morning. That meant that it was imperative that he should cross the lake that very night; since once his quarry was on the move, he himself, trudging slowly with his laden sled, would be left hopelessly behind.

Standing there, staring at the slow-moving dots, he became conscious of a numbness in one of his feet and began to pace rapidly to and fro under the trees to restore the circulation. From time to time as he walked he watched the dog train. It moved steadily in the direction of Elkington's camp, and every time he looked his apprehension increased, and the need for action on his own part pressed more heavily upon him.

"But I can do nothing before dusk," he muttered, glancing at the declining sun. "And even then——"

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He broke off and stared at the unproved lake ice. It might be a safe bridge, or it might not. Until it was too dark for him to be perceived from the opposite shore, it was impossible for him to even test the ice. Walking restlessly to and fro he watched the steady progress of the dogs. A sigh of wind in the tree-tops made him look up suddenly, and across the steeliness of the sky he saw moving a sullen greasy-looking cloud. Farther away there was another, and yet another, drifting slowly southward in the direction from which he had come.

"If the wind increases there will be snow," his mind prophesied, "and snow now will be the last straw!"

The sun sank lower and still his vigil was not relaxed, its rim was disappearing below the southern horizon, when he saw the dog train reach the camp; and a few minutes afterwards a sudden burst of flame in the neighbourhood of the camp told him that the fire was being replenished. He waited no longer. The dog train had halted at the camp, and though the rapidly falling twilight made it impossible for him to see, he had no doubt that it meant to stay there; and little doubt that it was an addition to the Elkington outfit.

Retreating to his own camp, he made himself some hot tea; and summoning all his patience, set himself to wait until the hour for decisive action should strike. The twilight slid into darkness, and still he waited. Twice he walked down to the lake shore, and stared in the direction of the camp, where a big fire made a great flare; and when the stars were coldly jubilant in the sky, he decided that the hour had come and slipped down the bank to test the ice. Wearing his snow-shoes, he moved slowly and cautiously in the direction of the island. The ice was quite firm, and did not even crack under his weight. Rejoicing, he

returned to the shore to secure his sledge, and had just reached it when on the light wind there came a sound that made his heart leap, and brought him to a sudden halt.

"That was a rifle-shot!" he whispered. Scarcely had the words passed his lips, when the faint sound came again and again, impinging ever so lightly on his ear drums; and on the heels of it came a whole series registering themselves confusedly as if a ragged volley had been fired.

"In God's name what does it mean?" he cried, and stared towards the opposite shore.

Brief flashes stabbed the darkness that lay outside the zone of the fire-glow. The faint sounds multiplied; and on the heels of them came another sound like a clamour of yelling voices, softened by distance. For a moment he stood, his face registering wrathful horror; then he whispered into the darkness: "That d——d trio has broken loose. They're attacking Elkington and the girl, the scoundrels!"

Convinced that this explanation was the right one, he left his sled where it was, and rifle in hand ready for action, moved out on the lake, breaking a swift trail for the further side, utterly careless of the danger that waited on his every step.

For a time the shots continued, growing louder as he progressed, but presently they died away, and except for the faint yelping of dogs, the Arctic silence fell once more, and by the time he had passed the island all was still. Desperate fear urged him forward. The fire still burned, but neither its light nor that of the hard stars enabled him to see anything. What had happened he could only conjecture; and what he conjectured only increased his apprehension.

Elkington and his daughter, attacked by the three adventurers, were bound to be at a disadvantage, for

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whilst Mollie Elkington had plenty of spirit, and though her father might be a man of resource, the situation was one that for them must be utterly unprecedented. And Montana Joe and the half-breeds were undoubtedly of the worst type of "bad men" whose hunting ground is the outer rim of civilization. It was hopeless to think that the girl and her father should have contended with him successfully; and the silence that now hung over the camp seemed to be of evil omen.

"God help the girl!" he whispered in the darkness. "If——"

The whisper was checked, as suddenly remembering that it would be folly to plunge into the heart of the camp, he swerved to the right. He would approach at a tangent and if possible learn what had happened before making his presence known. The cautious approach meant delay in arriving; but it was no more than wisdom, since appearing suddenly out of the darkness he was liable to be shot at sight by men who already had left him to perish by the rigours of the North.

He gained the shore without mishap some three hundred yards south of the camp, and slipping into the shadow of the woods, he crept forward cautiously. Ten yards from the fire he halted, and as he did so the sound of a groan reached him. He peered anxiously through the intervening trees. The fire burned brightly, and by its light he saw that the tents were gone, and that apparently the whole camp had been cleaned out. Apprehension was trebled within him by that realization. He stared aghast at the mystery of that clean sweep; and with the fear pounding at his heart was still staring, when again a groan broke on the crackle of the fire, and he heard a muttering voice:

"Gawd! . . . Gawd ter leave a man. . . ."

Another groan checked the word, and flinging caution aside, Clancy moved out of the shadow of the trees into the open. A swift glance round showed him the man whom he sought lying huddled in the snow, in the penumbra of the firelight. He stepped quickly towards him, and as he stopped the man cried hoarsely.

"Glory! You've come back, Anton!"

Montana Joe! As he made the recognition Clancy looked round bewilderedly, and then bent again over the man who was plainly in an evil case, the snow about him dark with blood.

"It isn't Anton," he said. "It is Clancy!"

"Ju-Jupiter!" There was wonder in the man's hoarse shaking voice. "Clan-cy! . . . You . . . got through?"

"Yes! Tell me what has happened! Where are Elkington and the girl? What——"

A groan from Montana broke on his words and he rolled heavily over.

"They got me . . . ther little devils!" he said thickly. "An' ther gal——"

"Who?" asked Clancy sharply.

The reply was another groan, as Montana Joe stretched convulsively in the snow. The corporal bent over him in an agony of apprehension. The dark patch in the snow was spreading alarmingly and the guide's breath was coming gaspingly.

"Who got you, Joe?" he cried. "Who got Miss Elkington?"

The words penetrated to the guide's failing mind. Convulsively he half lifted himself up.

"Who?" he gasped. "Why, ther durned——"

The words were interrupted by a sudden choking sound. A little gush of blood streamed from his lips, checking utterance, and quite suddenly he slipped

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back in the snow, jerked once or twice and then lay still. In utter despair the corporal looked down into the dead face. The death of the man was little to Clancy ; but that he had taken with him the secret of the vanishing of Mollie Elkington and her father was a cause of great disquiet. For that something quite beyond his own anticipations had happened was very clear to the corporal, as he lifted his eyes from the dead face and looked round the camping place. Some one had got Montana Joe with a rifle bullet, and according to the dead man, the killers had got Mollie Elkington. Who were they ?

As he asked himself the question, the phrase the dead guide had used leaped in his mind—"ther little devils." That description applied to neither Anton nor Jean Dubosc, who were both of more than average size. He began to walk quickly about the camp seeking a clue to the mystery ; and after a few minutes he literally stumbled on one in the darkness by the lake-side. Picking himself up, he began to grope for the cause of his discomfiture. A moment later he found it, and carrying it into the circle of firelight to examine it, discovered that it was a barbed ivory-headed fish-spear. As he stared at it, the significance of it broke on him suddenly, and he whistled aloud ; and then whispered prayerfully, " God help the girl ! God help her ! "

CHAPTER XI

A SUDDEN ATTACK

WHEN Montana Joe, shepherding the fugitives, had stepped into the firelight with the pack upon his shoulders, Jean Dubosc had stared at him in amazement, and then had broken into jest.

"Tiens! Montana, you hav' for a march been?"

"No," had been the white man's reply. "I guess these two are the pilgrims; I'm only ther one who spoiled the programme of the march."

"Ah!" had been the reply. "Den dey hav' runaway."

"They've tried ter, Jean. But I guess they won't go again for a bit."

"Non!" cried the half-breed. "We weel watch dem more careful."

Following that brief conversation, the fugitives were made aware of the fact that their movements were to be more restricted than had previously been the case. Montana Joe ordered them roughly to their tent, and forbade them to leave it without permission; and there, too utterly weary and down-hearted to make fresh plans or even to speak, fragments of the trio's conversation drifted to them.

"Ther dogs, Anton! They're a fine lot. Did you pay for 'em?"

"Pay!" It was Jean Dubosc who replied with a laugh. "Non! We take dem."

"Who was ther man?"

"He ees a leetle mans, an' he ees Eskimo, what you call Kogmollock."

Montana Joe knew the North, but his acquaintance with the Eskimo people was but scanty, and the name was without any significance to his mind.

"Oh," he said, "a blubber-eater! Did he kick?"

Dubosc laughed brutally. "He hav' a gun, an' he mak' sign to shoot, so——"

"Jean he shoot first!" broke in Anton. "An' after we tak' zee dogs."

Montana Joe nodded. "Well, a blubber-eater ain't of much account either way. An' we needed the dogs. I reckon thet to-morrow we'll pull out after the loot, an' git thar before the next big snow."

"We tak' dat Elkington an' zee leetle mees along with us?" asked Dubosc.

"Well, what d'you think?"

"Ah t'ink Ah mak' Elkington speak to-night; den eef he run away anoder taime we let him go."

"An' ther girl?"

"Ah not say dat," replied Dubosc, a brutal significance in his tones.

"Oh well," answered Montana Joe after a pause.

"We'll talk that over after supper. I'm nigh famished; an' there'll be time to burn on ther job before we turn in. Get the pot going, Anton."

As the conversation ended, Mr. Elkington looked at his daughter. "Mollie," he whispered, "Mollie!"

"Yes," answered the girl tonelessly.

"You heard?"

"Yes!"

"Those scoundrels are going to get rid of—of us. I shall speak to-night."

"You will tell them?"

"I shall tell them that I hid the plan at the last camping place, in order to gain time. They will take us back there for certain, but before the plan is found we must make another break for the woods."

"Without provisions?" asked the girl. "We shall die in a day."

"Yes; but better that than . . . than what may happen. That Dubosc is a devil incarnate!"

"Yes," the girl agreed. "He is that!" Then she moved suddenly. "There is another way, the way we agreed upon. You can say the plan is lost; but that you will lead them to the place. That will gain a longer grace. Even if you make straight for the place it will take some days; and in that time something may happen; we may meet some one——"

"Up here? This is not Broadway."

The girl disregarded the interruption. "There may be some one at the place we are making for. Ten years is a long time, and prospectors are always on the move; some of them may have discovered the place——"

"We should have heard if a thing like that had happened. There would have been a gold rush into this region like that of the Klondyke in '98."

"Anyway, we shall gain some days!"

"Yes!" agreed her father thoughtfully. "I believe, after all, that will be the best course to follow."

"I'm sure of it," said Mollie, her despondency quite gone. "It will give us some chance that we have not thought of. Perhaps——" She broke off sharply.

"What is it?" asked her father.

"The dogs!" she whispered suddenly. "If we could make friends——"

"They are more wolf than dog," said her father. "I am afraid that is a project that cannot be carried out."

"But something else will offer," said the girl with conviction. "I feel it in my bones. I won't believe we have reached the end of the trail. It is natural that having failed in our first attempt, we should be inclined to despair. But I have a presentiment that something is going to happen, something that will help us."

"I hope it is so; but——"

The crunch of feet on the frosted snow outside caused him to break off his words; and the next moment their view of the fire was blocked by the bulky form of Montana Joe. He entered without ceremony, looked thoughtfully at the pair who were virtually his prisoners, then with a glance back at the fire where the two half-breeds were busy he said care-

lessly : " Thet was a fool try at a get-away you made ter day, Elkington."

The man whom he addressed made no reply, and after a moment the guide continued : " Mind you, I ain't ther one ter blame you. I'd hev done ther same, but more careful-like. Dubosc ain't ther sort o' feller that one hankers ter trail with overlong."

Mr. Elkington stared at him wonderingly, but offered no comment ; and in the brief interval Montana looked once more in the direction of the two half-breeds, then he said casually : " You an' me's likelier pardners than them two breeds an' me."

" What do you mean, Montana ? " asked Mr. Elkington sharply.

The other's reply was given in a whisper : " I mean that ef you an' me signed articles I wouldn't mind them two murderers going ter perdition their own way. I'm through with them. A blubber-eater ain't properly a man ter my thinkin', but I don't hold wi' such promiscuous killin', an' I don't feel safe wi' a pair o' fellers what can do et. I'd be glad ter be quit of 'em."

" You mean that you want to join me, after what has happened ? "

" I guess that's about the programme. I thought et out whilst I was walkin' behind you an' the gal ter-day ; an' I figure I wouldn't hav' much show if I went back to civilization without you—not wi' them durned mounters ready ter start nosin' round. I'd hev ter put in a report o' what had happened ter you ; an' et's a million ter one thet the mounters would set out to verify et—them being built that way. Besides, though I ain't perticular squeamish, I don't hold in what that devil Dubosc es thinkin' of in regard to missy here, an' more nor that, half shares es better nor a third any day."

Mr. Elkington took a step forward. "I can trust you, Montana?" he whispered excitedly. "I can trust you this time?"

"If so be as we're pardners, yes. I guess I kin be trusted to look after my own interests; an' I ain't anxious ter be tangled up any more with a feller like thet Dubosc whom ther mounters are bound ter get sooner or later. Do we sign ther deeds for halves?"

Mr. Elkington hesitated. He did not know what to do, whether to trust the man who was doubly a renegade or not. And whilst he stood there in doubt Montana looked furtively round at his companions by the fire. That look decided Mr. Elkington's action; for it was obvious that Montana was afraid lest the half-breeds should grow suspicious.

"Sharp; ef them two breeds——"

"It's a bargain, Montana."

The guide thrust out a hand, and though he hated doing so, Elkington took it. Then the guide spoke again:

"You'll be asked ter part wi' that chart ter night, an' when you are——"

"I haven't got it," interrupted Mr. Elkington.

"You ain't got et?" There was a startling change in Montana's demeanour. "What durned hanky-panky——" He broke off and gave a little laugh. "Say, Elkington, I guess you're forgetting we're pardners now?"

"No! But it's the truth that I haven't got the parchment. I buried it at the last camping place. But I can find the way to——"

"You kin! That'll do! Et's as well you've lost thet paper. Lost! mind you. Stick ter that, say nothing about havin' buried et. Even that murderer Dubosc ain't goin' ter kill the goose before he paws ther eggs. But you'll be searched; an' I'll order

them ter do et; an' as like es not they'll want ter search the gal, too. But you'll chip in an' offer ter tak' us to ther place——"

"Willingly!"

"Thet's all right! Ther scheme'll go wi' my support, an' ter night I'll order yer ter be watched, an' arrange ter take ther last watch myself, and when them two breeds es sleepin' we'll pull out an——" Anton's voice calling the guide sounded outside and he broke off, then added in a whisper, "You've got et all. Pin on ter et an' be ready."

He went outside; and Mr. Elkington looked at his daughter.

"Mollie, I believe that we have found the way out. Montana's a blackguard; but he'll keep faith with his own interests!"

"That seems very clear!" answered the girl. "But why didn't he suggest all this in the woods this afternoon? He is quite a quick-change artist, and——"

"I expect he wanted the dogs! And you heard him say that as he walked behind us he was thinking the matter over; whilst it is clear he doesn't want to be involved in the doings of Jean Dubosc."

"As a partner——"

"He is welcome to all that gold," broke in Mr. Elkington. "I am playing for our lives—and we're going to win."

"I believe we are," said Mollie, "with the help of the knave."

"Knave or no knave——"

"Supper's ready, Elkington," sounded Montana's voice, outside the tent. "Come an' jine in."

Further conversation was impossible for the moment, and going outside, the girl and her father took their accustomed place by the fire. When the meal ended,

Mollie withdrew to the tent, and her father was about to follow when Montana's voice checked him.

"One minute, Elkington, thar's no durned hurry for you ter turn in that I knows of. Jest sit down again. I reckon thar's a question or two you hev got ter answer "

Elkington sat down again. Montana Joe lit his pipe, puffed heavily to get it going, then screwed his face to a pretentious solemnity.

"Et's about a certain paper," he began, winking at the man whom he addressed. "You know that paper, an' I reckon we want ter see it."

"You mean the paper about the Clancy-Elkington gold-strike ? "

"Thet's ther one."

"I haven't got it," answered Mr. Elkington.

"*Sacre bleu !* " cried Dubosc, starting to his feet, mad passion in his eyes.

"Sit down, Jean ! " said Montana in a peremptory voice. "Give Elkington a chance ter explain ! "

Dubosc showed signs of rebellion, and again Montana spoke. "Don't be a durned fool, Dubosc ! Sit down, I tell you. Ther feller ain't goin' to run away."

The half-breed sat down again, muttering under his breath as he did so, and Montana addressed Elkington again.

"Thet bluff won't work," he said truculently ; though the truculence was softened by the wink that only the man whom he addressed saw ; "an' I reckon I'd throw down ther cards ef I was you. Jean here ain't ther man ter play with."

"But it's the truth," answered Elkington. "I haven't got it. I have lost it."

"*Sacre !* " from Anton.

"You can search me if you like——"

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"I guess that's what we shall do, an' ther gal too, so ef et's a bluff, ter save trouble you'll——"

"It isn't a bluff! I haven't the paper, neither has my daughter. But I have the details in my head, and with the help of the map I think I can lead you to the place."

"You kin?"

"Yes! I remember the directions quite plainly."

"Den, M'sieu Elkington, you weel please repeat them; or I weel shoot——"

"Shut up, Dubosc!" intervened Montana. "I'm conducting this cross-examination. You kin hev your turn when I'm through."

Dubosc subsided again, and there was a minute's silence, which most unexpectedly was broken by a sharp sound like the clicking of the breech-bolt of a rifle. Anton started to his feet, staring into the darkness.

"Mon Dieu! What was dat?"

He had his answer a second later, when out of the darkness, at the edge of the lake came a spurt of flame and the crack of a rifle; whilst almost simultaneously a bullet sang over their heads and plugged a tree behind them.

"*Tonnerre!*"

As the exclamation ripped from him, Dubosc slid deftly back towards the tent where the rifles were stacked, seized one, stripped it of its protective covering, and threw himself down into the shadow. The others were still falling back from the firelight, when two more rifles spoke from opposite points; and from the trees directly to the right. Something was thrown, which fell short, and slithered along the trodden snow of the camp towards the firelight, where it lay with all its length full in the glow.

"A fish spear!" cried Montana, then a light broke

on him. "It's them durned Kogmollocks! They've come for the dogs!"

The mysterious shots out of the night were explained, and Anton laughed recklessly. "Ah, not mind Kogmollocks, but dat dey should rifles hav'——"

A scattered volley broke out of the darkness in front; whilst Montana and Anton sought the friendly shadows. Mr. Elkington, thinking of Mollie, was creeping towards the tent when Anton intervened.

"Non! m'sieu. Take zee gun and shoot. Dat ees zee best way."

He thrust a rifle into the other's hands as he spoke, and a handful of cartridges, whilst Montana gave orders. "Watch the wood, Elkington. The beggars may try to rush us from behind."

The Eskimos in front continued to fire; but their aim was bad, the cheap rifles, traded to them by whalers, throwing high. The men attacked replied only at intervals, when there was some chance of registering a hit, and for a time no one was struck; then suddenly Montana leaped clean in the air and fell sprawling in the snow.

"I've got it," he cried as he half rose.

"Bad?" inquired Anton, and fired at a squat figure outlined against the snow.

"It's a gruelling one," answered Montana, "but I can still shoot, I reckon."

Anton crept over to the wounded man and examined him, then he went back to Dubosc and talked with him in the intervals of firing, and at the end of the talk Dubosc crawled into the shadows where the dogs were tethered and began to harness them to the sled.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Mr. Elkington, observing the preparations, and wondering what he was about.

"Queet an' run for eet," replied Dubosc, with a grin.

"Then I will inform my daughter," said Mr. Elkington.

"Oui ! Oui !" answered the half-breed.

Elkington turned and was beginning to creep towards the tent, when a rifle butt struck him on the head, knocking him senseless ; and whilst Anton returned the fire of the Kogmollocks, Dubosc bound the white man to the sledge. At that point Montana Joe intervened.

"Say ! You're not going ter leave me, boys ? "

Neither of the half-breeds replied ; but as there was a quickening of the native shooting, Anton emptied a clip of cartridges among them, then ran to the dogs and yelled, " Moosh ! Moosh ! "

As the dogs started he moved ahead, whilst Dubosc brought up the rear, firing on the Kogmollocks, who, as some of them divined what was happening, gave a sudden blood-curdling yell, and ran forward. The yell brought Mollie Elkington to the tent door in alarm, and she was just in time to see the sledge disappearing, and to mark the half-score or so of figures charging towards the fire. She broke from the tent and started to run ; but had not taken two steps when she was neatly tripped, and, before she was aware of what had happened, was bound, and a prisoner in the hands of the waspish little men who, with shouts of exultation, began immediately to plunder the camp. In a very few minutes the place was stripped bare ; and whilst the girl lay in helpless bewilderment in the snow, she saw a couple of dog teams advance out of the darkness. On one sledge the plunder was thrown ; and to the second she herself was bound, and in a remarkably short space of time they were heading up the lake, leaving the whole camp deserted except for Montana, who lay staring

with despairing eyes into the darkness. As he stared, he cursed the treacherous half-breeds who had fled, leaving him to his fate ; and forgot that it was precisely what he himself had meant to do to them that very night.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE IGLOO

L YING on the sled, unable to move, and in doubt as to her father's fate, Mollie Elkington was plunged in the depths of despair. She guessed that her captors were the friends of the Kogmollock whom Dubosc had so ruthlessly shot for his dogs ; and whilst she was distressed for her father, her own present jeopardy was not to be ignored. As the dogs sped on she recalled what she knew of the character of the Eskimo peoples, which was not very much. That on the whole they were a quiet and inoffensive race she knew ; but she remembered having read somewhere that the various tribes differed considerably in their characteristics ; and that whilst the Nunatalmutes were of timid disposition, easily cowed by white men who made a show of force, the Kogmollocks were quite fierce and blood-thirsty when roused. She recalled something about a whaling crew that had been murdered by them because of an Eskimo woman ; and as she remembered how Anton and Dubosc had murdered the Kogmollock for his dogs, she grew afraid. These men were not likely to distinguish between her and the men against whom they had real cause for offence, and unless one of them understood English, which was barely possible, she had no means by which she could make the truth known to them.

Cramped in body with the bonds that bound her to the sled ; harassed by tormenting thoughts ; and further harassed by an idea that the toes of her right foot were freezing, she was conscious of relief when the sled came to a standstill, and her bonds being loosed she was dragged roughly to her feet. Looking around, she saw a number of snow-covered humps running along the bank of what was either a wide river or a long narrow inlet of the sea, and as she looked more closely, she saw that the humps were so similar as to suggest human construction, and guessed that she was looking on an Eskimo village.

She was not left long to inspect the landscape. One of her captors, approaching her, seized her arm, and began to pull her towards one of the snow-covered humps. They reached what looked as much like the entrance to a big dog kennel as anything else and by gestures the man signified that she was to enter. Not knowing what else to do, she crawled up the short passage, until she reached a square chamber, full of pungent wood-smoke and rank with the smell of burning seal-oil and with noisome odours of humanity.

A slush lamp lit the interior, revealing an incredibly wrinkled old Eskimo woman, seated on some skins. The woman stood up at their entrance, and without speaking listened whilst the man offered what was obviously an explanation ; then she nodded ; and a moment afterwards the man dropped the caribou-skin door curtain, and disappeared. The old woman, who was to be her hostess or gaoler, drew near and looked at the girl with eyes that in spite of her age were yet wonderfully bright. The light of curiosity in their dark deeps gave place to one of wonder as Mollie, throwing back the fur hood of her parka, revealed her face more fully ; and whilst the old woman grunted unintelligently, the girl returned her

stare with interest, marking the Mongolian caste of features which makes some Eskimo so similar in appearance to Japanese, and the gums with the teeth ground down to the level, through much chewing of leather. After a moment the old woman's curiosity was satisfied. She grunted again, pointed to a heap of skins in a corner, and herself squatted down again by the small fire of sticks.

Since there appeared nothing else that she could do, the girl threw off the fur parka which she had been wearing at the moment of her capture, and seating herself upon the skins gave herself up to thought. For the moment, as she was convinced, no further mishap was likely to befall herself, and her thoughts went out to her father. Where was he and what had happened to him? She visioned the sledge as she had glimpsed it disappearing in the shadow of the woods, and had an impression of a recumbent form lying on the top of the load. Anxiously she strove to determine whether she had really seen that or whether it was a figment of the mind, but was unable to decide between the alternatives. One thing, however, was clear to her. Something must have happened to her father or he would never have left her to fall a prisoner into the hands of the Kogmollocks; or at all events he would have remained with her.

Recalling the camp as it had been when, with the Eskimo yell in her ears, she had broken from the tent, she remembered one man lying in the snow; but that, as she knew, was Montana Joe, whose cry when he was hit she had heard. Had her father also been wounded, or had he against his will been carried off by the two half-breeds in their panicky flight? Her mind, thus stumbling on the truth, inclined to the latter belief; and with the thought came an increase in her anxiety for her father.

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Anton and Dubosc were callous and ruthless men, and the latter in addition was a fugitive from justice, not likely to be deterred from his purpose by any scruples. Montana Joe, as his arrangement with her father had shown, had distrusted the half-breeds, and had perhaps grown a little afraid of them ; certainly he had not liked the callous way of the men who had been his fellow conspirators. And now her father was alone with these two men of mixed race, both moved by that most ruthless of all motives, cupidity, and one of them twice a murderer. Into her mind flashed the remembrance of what Montana Joe had said about Dubosc's knowledge of the practices of Alaskan shamans. The shamans were the Indian medicine men ; and she had no doubt that their practices included torture. She grew sick with horror at the thought, reflecting that, once the secret of the gold was revealed by her father, revelation would be the signal for his death.

She knew that the two men, fleeing for their lives, were not likely to burden themselves overlong with her father. Doubtless they would push on until they had shaken off whatever pursuit there might be ; then at the first camp maybe, by any means that occurred to them, they would compel her father to make known the situation of the lost mine, and after that——"

"God help him !" she whispered, appalled at the possibilities of the situation. "God deliver him," and after this brief anguished prayer she rose to her feet and began to pace up and down the narrow interior of the igloo. On her first motion the old Kogmollock woman looked at her sharply, then seeing that her prisoner made no attempt to pass the skin which curtained the igloo entrance, once more turned an apathetic gaze on the fire, indifferent to, though probably not unconscious of, the anxiety which drove this fair-faced woman of an alien race round and round the igloo, as

restlessly as a wolf round a cage. Once indeed, Mollie Elkington stopped before the caribou-skin curtain. There was only that between her and freedom. The men who had captured her had by this time probably retired to their own igloos. It would be easy for her to overcome the old woman, to fling aside the curtain, crawl down the tunnel-like entrance and reach the open air. And then ?

She gave a little groan of despair as she thought of the frozen world beyond the igloo. The Kogmollocks had known very well what they were about when they had left her in the care of this ancient woman. Snow and the bitter cold of the North were their warders. They knew that she could not break away except to her death from Arctic frost or hunger—so the way from the igloo was left unguarded.

Tired of wandering round the confined space, she threw herself on the skins again ; and as she did so, the ancient Kogmollock woman indicated that she herself was going to sleep, and pointing to the skins where the girl was seated and then to Mollie herself, by gesture told her to sleep also. Mollie obediently stretched herself, and pulling her parka over her, she once more gave herself up to thought. What was to happen to herself ? She could not even conjecture. It seemed an ironic thing that she should suffer for the action of men whose victims she and her father were ; but the Eskimos, enraged by the murder of their tribesmen, were not likely to distinguish between the murderers and those whom they would naturally associate with them. Unless some of the Kogmollocks had been in touch with the crews of whalers wintering on the coast, and so had acquired some scanty knowledge of English, it would be impossible for her to explain what the situation really was. And in that case—— Her mind shrank before the possibilities that presented themselves ; and she

resolutely put the thought of them from her, and after some time drifted into sleep.

She awakened quite suddenly with a sound in her ears that made her look swiftly towards the caribou-skin curtain. Again she caught the sound and, convinced that some one or something was crawling up the passage to the igloo, she quietly raised herself, and with her back to the wall sat waiting. Slight as was the noise she made in moving, it must have reached the intruder; for the sound of movement ceased, and was not renewed for what seemed quite a long time.

When it was she glanced swiftly at the old Kogmollock woman to learn if she had heard the noise. Plainly she had not, for as the slush-lamp revealed, she was sound asleep, her wrinkled mask of a face having a dead look in the feeble light. As she made the discovery, her first impulse was to awaken the woman gaoler, and call her attention to the intruder; but a desire to discover who or what was moving so cautiously on the other side of the curtain stayed her hand, and with her eyes fixed on the place where the intruder must emerge, she waited. Again, and this time for no apparent reason, the noise of movement ceased; though now she could hear a faint sound of breathing, and whilst she stared with fascinated eyes, she saw the curtain shake.

What furtive thing was crouched there, waiting, watching? A fear of the unknown fell upon her, and she shivered as at a blast of icy air. Her eyes indexed the feeling of horror which was surging within her; and then whilst she stared in a frightened dumbness, she saw a mittened hand silently drag the skin curtain a little to one side, and glimpsed the vague outline of a man crouching in the passage surveying the interior. Only a dim impression of a face was possible to her,

the outline being blurred, and any distinctive features made void by the poor light the slush-lamp afforded. It was impossible to recognize anyone in that position, and she could not even tell whether the new-comer was a white man or a Kogmollock. But with a tremendous effort she forced herself to meet the intruder's eyes, and then, to her sudden relief, caught the sound of a whisper that made her heart beat violently for very gladness.

"Hist! Miss Elkington," asked the whispering intruder. "Are you alone?"

Mollie pointed to the old woman, and the man who asked the question stared into the dimness, trying to make out who was wrapped in those skins by the dying fire. She grasped his difficulty, and with her eyes turned towards her gaoler explained in a whisper:

"An old woman. No need to be afraid unless you disturb her."

On that the new-comer slipped past the curtain into the igloo, and as he stood upright, she caught sight of his face in the light of the slush-lamp.

"You!" she whispered in amazement. "You—Corporal Clancy?"

"You weren't expecting to see me, Miss Elkington?" he asked in a swift whisper.

"No," was the reply. "I was not! I heard that you were dead."

For one moment an odd look came on Clancy's face, which the girl noticed without being aware of the cause of it; that being the corporal's flash of wonder how she had heard of his supposed death. A second later he replied:

"As you see I am very much alive, though by all the rules of the game I ought to be a frozen corpse."

"I am very glad you are so much alive," whispered the girl with a swift smile.

Her tones and the smile carried conviction of her

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sincerity to Clancy's mind ; and though there were certain ideas which he had entertained that required adjustment, he dismissed them summarily.

" I've come to get you out of this," he said, " If you will prepare for a journey."

" That is quickly done," she said, slipping on her parka. " There is nothing——"

A sound of gasping astonishment made Clancy swing round swiftly. The old Kogmollock woman was awake and regarding them with amazed eyes. If she cried out, escape would be impossible. Instantly the corporal thrust forward his rifle and at the same time set a finger on his lips. That the old woman understood the sign was evident, for she made no attempt to move or cry out, much to the corporal's relief. He looked at Molly Elkington.

" I shall have to tie her up," he said. " If I leave her free she will alarm the village as soon as we are gone, and that will be fatal."

He looked round for anything that would serve for this purpose, and found some dog harness. With it in his hand he approached the old woman, who apparently accepted the situation with philosophic resignation. Before he bound her a thought occurred to him, and throwing open his fur parka, he pointed to his uniform, knowing that the old woman must at some time or other have met officers of the Mounted Police ; then by signs he indicated that he proposed to take the girl away with him ; all this in the hope that possibly the knowledge that it was an officer of the law who had taken away their captive might deter the Kogmollocks from pursuing them. That done he bound the old woman, gagging her with a piece of rabbit skin. She submitted with no more than a grunt of disapproval ; and when he had finished the corporal stood and surveyed his handiwork.

"I'm sorry, old lady," he said deprecatingly, "But there's nothing else for it."

He looked round, and finding a little heap of fuel, put two or three sticks upon the fire. The woman understood his action and her old eyes beamed approval. Then Clancy turned to the girl.

"If you are ready, Miss Elkington, we will go."

"I am quite ready."

"I will go first," he said, "in case of trouble. When I whistle you will follow."

He lifted the curtain and crept down the short passage which gave egress from the igloo. At the entrance he waited a moment, his rifle ready for action, and then cautiously looked forth. Overhead the mighty aurora flashed and gleamed; and under it the waste of snow, with the humps of the igloos of the Kogmollock village showed clearly. There was no one in sight. Nothing moved, and the dogs, which he feared far more than some night-prowling tribesman, were apparently buried in the snow asleep. Turning his head, he whistled softly, and then stepped into the open. A moment later Mollie Elkington joined him.

"This way," he whispered, turning towards the nearest timber. "I have a sled across there."

They moved quickly and silently, the corporal turning often to see their flight was not observed; and one of these turns was almost the occasion of their undoing, for in it he stepped on a husky half-buried in the snow, asleep. He felt the dog squirm, and dropped right on it before the yelp that it gave had fairly left its throat. Then with ruthless hands he caught the furry throat, and proceeded to strangle it, thrusting its nose in the snow to deaden any sound it might make. For two dreadful minutes Mollie Elkington stood there frozen with horror and fear, watching the tangle of man and

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dog, for the husky died hard, then Clancy stood up breathing heavily.

"You are not hurt?" the girl whispered anxiously. "That poor brute did not——"

"No!" he whispered gaspingly. "I didn't give it the chance. Hurry! That yelp may have wakened some one."

With haste, but now watchful of their step, they fled to the timber line, and reached it without mishap. Without pausing, Clancy turned to the left, and keeping to the shadow of the trees reached the place where his sled was standing. As she saw it, Mollie Elkington spoke suddenly.

"Your dogs—they——"

"I have none," he said briefly. "I am my own team."

Against a tree a pair of snow-shoes were standing, and bound on the top of the sled-load was the other pair that he had brought from the dead trapper's cabin. He turned to her.

"You can use snow-shoes, Miss Elkington?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Thank Heaven! Then we shall be able to push along."

He passed the webbed shoes to her, watched her slip them on, and then putting on his own harnessed himself to the sled.

"We shall have to skirt the timber for a time," he said. "It is too thick to cross at this point. And we must push on. Just put your weight against each side of the sled, will you, to loosen the runners." The girl obeyed him, broke loose the runners that had frozen in the snow, and as the corporal bent his shoulders and stepped forward the sled started with a jerk. As it did so Miss Elkington looked across the snow towards the Kogmollock village. The wild fires of the aurora were dying

down, but she could just make out the humps which represented the igloos and gave a little shudder as she thought of what might have befallen her in one of them. Then her eyes turned to Clancy's tall figure bent in the traces ahead of her ; and as she did so, a new emotion that was deeper than gratitude surged in her heart, an emotion that in spite of the bitter cold warmed her face with a swift flush of maidenly blood

CHAPTER XIII

CLANCY ASKS A QUESTION

FOR two hours Clancy pulled steadily along the edge of the timber, until he came to a break in the woods, where a few blasted trunks standing gaunt in the snow bore mute testimony to the fact that fire had swept a broad swathe through the serried trees. There he turned and for a moment or two halted.

"Where are you going ? " asked the girl, breaking an hour's silence.

He pointed to a trail in the snow. " I am following my own trail backward for the present. We gain time that way, but soon we must have a talk. Not just now," he said quickly, as she began to speak. " We haven't time. It is essential that we should get as far away from that village before daybreak as is possible."

" Wouldn't it help if I joined you in pulling the sled ? "

" If you feel able——" he began doubtfully.

" I am perfectly fit," she interrupted. " And I shall feel much more comfortable if I am doing something."

Clancy nodded, and without further words lengthened the traces that they might pull together tandem-fashion ; and when the arrangement was completed, they were yoked together with no more than six feet

between them, Clancy leading. It was now possible to talk, and over his shoulder the corporal asked questions which were troubling him.

"Tell me what happened back at your camp on the lake? Why did the Kogmollocks attack you? And where is Mr. Elkington?"

"I don't know where my father is," answered Mollie in a troubled voice. "I have an idea that I saw him on the sled when Anton and that man Dubosc fled from the Kogmollocks. The other man, Montana Joe, was hurt——"

"I know! I saw him. He died whilst I was talking to him. He didn't explain much, he hadn't time; and I can't understand why the Kogmollocks attacked you at all. The Eskimo tribes are usually inoffensive, though this particular tribe have been known to fall into mad rages on provocation; and among themselves they fight for wives in a bloodthirsty way."

"They had plenty of provocation," answered the girl. "Anton and Dubosc saw a sled team up the lake, and they left the camp to try and get it. The man with it was a Kogmollock and Dubosc shot him dead and stole the dogs."

Clancy spared breath for a whistle. "And last night you were attacked? No doubt the dead man's friends learned what had happened, and tracked his murderers to your camp. I was sure that they must have been very incensed and excited to make an attack upon you; and I am afraid there may be further trouble in store for us, when they discover your flight. Unless that old woman whom I tied up recognized my uniform, your captors will certainly confuse me with the men who escaped them, and will very likely follow our trail. And they can travel some when they get going."

As he finished speaking he turned and looked back on the way that they had come. The cold fires of the

aurora had died out of the sky, and in the Arctic gloom the open place between the lines of timber, with its few gaunt trunks, looked grey and ghostlike, whilst on either hand the forest presented a vague vast frontal of coal-black shadow. But except for themselves the trail was empty of life ; and, so far as immediate aspects were concerned, all the earth also. They might have been adventurers in a planet where sentient life did not exist ; and as they stole on, two wanderers fearful of the coming of dawn, against the vast forces of the North marshalled for their undoing, it seemed impossible that they could ever reach the haven of safety they ardently desired.

Puny figures in the cold vastness, they pushed onwards, to find that even hostile nature could do them ironic service. For with the slow dawn came wind and, with the wind, snow. For some time it had been in Clancy's mind that, once they reached the lake, they must light a fire and make breakfast, since in the Northland the human machine, for the expenditure of energy that is demanded of it there, requires generous stoking. The lake was now in sight, and another few hundred yards would bring them to it ; but as the beginnings of a gale lifted the snow in front in a misty smother, and at the same time sweeping down the open drove a hard shot-like snow into their face, he knew that they would have to camp for some hours, perhaps for days.

This fact, however, brought no increase of apprehension ; for whilst it delayed them, the snow would serve them well, covering their trail so that in half an hour it would be obliterated, and at the same time if the pursuit had started it would drive the enraged Kogmollocks back to their igloos. Rejoicing in that knowledge, with his head bent to the icy wind and cruel snow, he called over his shoulder to the girl :

"We shall have to camp."

Directing his course a little nearer to the trees, he presently reached a place where rising ground formed a bulwark against the storm, and moving a little deeper into the wood, he quickly got a fire going, hitched a blanket between two saplings as a screen and to throw back the heat of the fire, and then began to cook breakfast.

When that stage was reached there was nothing that Mollie Elkington could do to help, and seated on the sled she stared thoughtfully into the fire. Glancing at her from time to time, Clancy's face also took on a thoughtful expression, and whilst he fried the moose-steak, he was concerned with thoughts that had come to him on the march from the Eskimo village.

That the girl was anxious for her father was certain and apparently not without reason. Elkington had unquestionably been carried off by the two rascally half-breeds because he held the secret of the gold-mine which was the *raison d'être* of the expedition, and as soon as possible he himself must get on the trail of the scoundrels, to prevent another crime. But the thing that preplexed him related to himself rather than to Elkington. In the Kogmollock igloo the girl had revealed her belief that he was dead, when, unless she had knowledge of what had befallen him, she could have no possible ground for that belief. Did she know what had happened? Had her father had any part in the action of Anton and Montana Joe?

Dubosc's story, with the certainty that Mr. Elkington knew the story of Clancy senior and the belief that the American was almost certainly seeking the mine that had been discovered and lost by the disappearance of Sir Terence, had combined to make the corporal think very badly of John B. Elkington. That the latter was an unscrupulous man, Clancy was convinced; but that his unscrupulousness extended so far as to share in the

attempt to get rid of himself, he found it rather difficult to believe. Yet it was quite possible ; for in the course of his professional duties the corporal had come in touch with more than one smiling gentlemanly scoundrel, and would probably do so again. Elkington might be of that breed ; and his daughter——

He glanced at the beautiful girl staring pensively into the fire, and his heart denied the thought that his mind had played with. He could not believe that she would be in partnership with such scoundrels as Montana Joe and Anton and Dubosc, no matter in how passive a way. He was sure of that ; then, quite suddenly and without premeditation, he asked a question.

" Miss Elkington, what made you think that I was dead ? "

The girl started from her reverie, and then answered the question quite simply. " When Montana and Anton brought that man Dubosc back to our camp in the middle of the night, I was awake and I saw them. They did not see me, and I heard Montana order Dubosc to throw ' the mounter's gun ' into the lake, lest my father's suspicions should be roused by the sight of it. I knew that you had been following Dubosc ; and naturally I argued the worst, as I think did my father."

The corporal thoughtfully turned the moose-steak in the pan, then he asked, " You told your father—and he did nothing in the matter ? "

" He had no opportunity," answered the girl quickly, recognizing the accusing tone in his words. " That night we discovered for certainty a fact that we had suspected for some little time, namely that Montana Joe and Anton were scoundrels, who whilst serving my father were secretly working for his undoing. The very next morning, when my father declined to have Dubosc accompany us, they openly rebelled, and deprived us of all arms."

" Ah ! " said the corporal suddenly, " then to that extent I was right after all, though knowing nothing of the Kogmollocks I misinterpreted the sounds of firing, and thought that Montana Joe and the others must be attacking you and your father."

" Montana was already repenting of his rebellion. I think he had grown a little afraid of Anton and Dubosc's doings and particularly of the latter's recklessness. He realized that, whatever had happened to you, the Mounted Police would sooner or later take up the trail of Jean Dubosc again, and that once on it they would entertain suspicions of the men found in association with him. Anyhow, yesterday, he made a bargain with my father, and last night we were to have crept out of camp leaving the half-breeds behind ; but the Kogmollocks spoiled all that, and my father is in the hands of these two scoundrels." A sudden quaver came in her voice. " I am afraid," she cried, " oh, I am much afraid for him ! "

Clancy thought that she had reason to be, but he did not say so. There was another question he wanted to ask, not because he had any doubt as to the answer, but rather because he wished to ascertain the extent of the girl's knowledge of certain things.

" But why should Anton and Dubosc, fleeing from the Kogmollocks, burden themselves with Mr. Elkington ? "

" Because he has the secret of a rich gold-mine, which they are anxious to discover and steal."

" As your father stole it." The words shaped themselves in Clancy's mind, but they did not pass his lips. Instead he asked quickly : " It was in the mine that your father offered me a partnership if I would join forces with him ? "

" Yes," answered the girl quite simply.

Clancy's mind still moved among perplexing things.

Why Elkington had offered that partnership was still beyond his comprehension. If, as he believed, the American was the partner who had deserted or killed his father ten years back, there seemed to be no good reason why he should offer to share with the son that which he had stolen from the father, unless—yes, unless he was afraid of the son's vengeance.

The corporal remembered that Elkington had tried to turn him aside from his vendetta of justice ; that he had urged the uselessness of his following the man Benedict after all the years that had passed. And there, as he still told himself, Elkington's self-interest and instinct of self-preservation had spoken. The American, afraid of what he might discover, had tried to dissuade him from his quest, had offered him a handsome bribe to abandon it. He could see no other way of reading the situation ; and now a fate not unakin to the mysterious one that had overtaken Sir Terence Clancy seemed likely to fall on Elkington himself, bearing as he did a valuable secret, and being as he was a prisoner in the hands of a pair of murderous rascals. As he thought of the situation, it seemed to him to embody a piece of poetic justice, which for some things he was not averse to ; but, as he glanced again at the girl's pensive figure across the fire, his heart smote him. She was afraid for her father—the man who, as he believed, had betrayed his own father ten years ago. Could he leave her to suffer as he himself had suffered ; and to torment herself as he had done through long years with the question of the fate that had befallen one dearly loved ?

He knew, none better, all the dark imaginings the mind could conjure up when left in doubt—could he allow this girl's life to be shadowed by the torturing thoughts that through the years must constantly recur ? As he asked himself the question he looked at the girl.

again, and their eyes met, the girl's full of soft appeal. Then, as if she had divined something of his thoughts, the girl spoke abruptly.

"You will help my father, corporal? You will help me to find him?"

There was no denying an appeal so given; and in any case the necessity was laid upon him to find Mr. Elkington if he could in order to learn the truth that for ten years had been hidden from him. Besides, there was Jean Dubosc! It was his duty to arrest him, his duty also to deliver the American from the murderous half-breeds' hands. All these considerations dictated his answer, but most of all the appeal in Mollie Elkington's eyes shaped it.

"Of course!" he said. "But we can do nothing till the snow ceases. And for your comfort I may tell you that, as we are driven to camp, so will Anton and Dubosc be. When we have eaten you must tell me in what direction those scoundrels were making, then we can perhaps arrange a cut-off, but breakfast is ready, and I think I shall forbid conversation until it is eaten."

He helped her generously to the wilderness fare, poured out a mug of tea and set it to her hand; and then Mollie Elkington observed that he himself was without.

"Your tea——" she began.

"There is but one mug," he said with a laugh, "and I have nothing that will serve as a substitute. I will wait until you——"

"No!" broke in the girl quickly. "That is not desirable. I know how thirsty you must be, and how you must want this refreshing tea. We will share the mug——" She gave a little laugh as she offered the explanation—"as they did in primitive times."

"Share," he began, a little embarrassed.

"Yes," she answered, "that is if you don't mind."

"Mind!" he laughed, as he echoed the word. "He would be an odd man who would mind sharing a cup with——" He broke off sharply as he saw the swift blood surge in her beautiful face; then to banish the embarrassment almost inevitable in such a situation, he picked up the mug and held it towards her.

"Turn and turn about then," he said and laughed again. "But you know the rule—ladies first. Drink, and then I shall feel at liberty to drain the cup."

Mollie Elkington took the mug, and lifted it to her lips. As she did so she caught his grey eyes fixed upon her with a light in them that made her lower her own eyes in sudden shyness. She took but a small sip of the scalding tea, and then held the mug towards him. He took it, looked at its almost undiminished contents quizzically, then he laughed.

"A bird's drink! Miss Elkington. You must do better than that next time."

He himself drank freely, then he refilled the mug, set it on the blanket where she sat, and in silence they began to eat the meal which he had prepared. The silence was continued until the very end of the meal; but a new and friendlier relation had been established. Clancy, as he ate, thought nothing of Mr. Elkington, and much of the girl who sat not an arm's length away from him. Her beauty and her helplessness alike appealed to him, so that when he remembered his suspicions of her father aroused by Dubosc's story, he found himself disassociating her from them. It was true that she had recognized his name, but the fact that she had taken him to her father was itself a denial of guilty knowledge, so far as she herself was concerned. He was thinking these thoughts when suddenly the girl pushed the enamelled plate from her and spoke.

"Tell me how you found me?" she said. "I am dying with curiosity."

"It is a longer story than just that," he said, and told her how his suspicions had been aroused by what he had overheard after his visit to her father's camp ; then, continuing his narration, he told her of the capture of Dubosc and of his own discomfiture at the hands of his prisoner and of the friends who had appeared out of the night to help him. He related his experiences up to the point where he had found Montana Joe dying at the looted camp, and explained the quandary he had been in then.

"The little that Montana Joe told me before he died was not very helpful. I knew that the camp had been attacked and sacked, and that Dubosc and Anton had deserted him ; but at first I was under the impression that the half-breeds had carried you away with them. Then I found an Eskimo spear, and a further examination of the snow made one thing clear, that whilst one sled accompanied by two men had plunged into the wood, and followed a course directly away from the lake, there was no trail of yours there. I found the mark of feet carrying something heavy to the lake-side ; I found also a place where a body had rested in the snow before being lifted on a sled ; and as Montana had hinted that whoever had killed him had got you, I argued that you had been carried on the main trail leading from the camp and up the lake.

"I was delayed a little, having to fetch my sled, which, as I told you, I left behind me when I realized that there was trouble at your camp ; but once I had secured it I trudged along as fast as I possibly could, following the sled trail up the lake, packed by the passage of many feet.

"After a couple of hours' travel with the moon shining on them I came in sight of the igloos, and retreated to the wood to think out my plan of campaign. At first I thought I would depend upon the power of the

law alone. There is no tribe in the Northland but what has some acquaintance with the Mounted Police, and moral suasion is nearly always effective, when a question of the law is involved. But I felt that for your sake I could not afford to make a mistake. I did not know why the Eskimo people had captured you, and carried you away ; but knowing that for them to proceed to such extremes they must be acting under the stress of great excitement, I decided to take no chances.

"Accordingly, assuring myself that there was no one moving about the village, and that the igloos were silent, I crept forward to investigate. I was afraid lest I should arouse the dogs ; but managed to avoid that, and I had the good fortune to stumble on your trail almost immediately. It led me straight to the igloo where I found you, and the rest you know."

"Yes !" she answered in a voice that was shaking with emotion. "I know, and, Corporal Clancy, I am, believe me, profoundly grateful."

As she spoke, she leaned forward a little. Her eyes were shining ; her face radiant ; all her bearing eloquent of her consciousness of indebtedness ; and suddenly Clancy was moved to ask a question which had troubled him greatly.

"You are grateful, Miss Elkington ? Then in exchange tell me what my name and title mean to you ; tell me why you were so interested on the occasion of our first meeting ? "

As he asked the question, a startled look came on the girl's face, and she made a quick movement of surprise. Then the startled look gave place to one of doubt, and when she spoke her tone was one of trouble and the words came haltingly. "I am not sure that . . . that I . . . ought to tell you. Why . . . why do you ask, Corporal Clancy ? "

CHAPTER XIV

A PLEA FOR FAITH

AS Clancy listened to the hesitating reply to his question, old suspicions awoke within him ; and again he was assailed with the conviction that Dubosc's story was the true one, and that John B. Elkington was his father's old partner. And with that conviction came another ; namely that the girl knew the whole story, and that having listened to his resolve to hunt down the man who, as he suspected, had been the cause of his father's death, she was determined to shield her father. But having asked his question, Clancy was not prepared to accept an evasion for his answer.

"I will tell you why," he answered brusquely. "That man whom I was after—Jean Dubosc—recognized me. In the first moment he was utterly startled, mistaking me for my father, whom he had seen long ago. When I found he had known my father, naturally I asked questions. Dubosc, after a little persuasion, told me a strange story ; part of which I had already guessed. It was to the effect that my father and his partner, known as Yankee Ben, came to the North here ; made a great strike of gold, that they were seen returning together and that Yankee Ben arrived at Lone Moose camp alone, starving ; with the story that he had lost my father in the great woods. The men who succoured him believed that he had killed my father ; but they were too eager to discover the secret of the gold to trouble about that——"

"But they did not learn the secret ? " interrupted the girl quickly.

"I gathered that they did not," answered the corporal.

"Then no doubt the gold is there still ! " said Mollie

in a tone that to the Corporal's ears sounded like one of relief. It moved within him a swift surge of anger.

"Gold!" he cried. "What do I care about gold? I want vengeance on the slayer of my father."

"On Yankee Ben?" asked the girl quietly. "Are you so sure he slew Sir Terence? A suspicion is—well, a suspicion; and Jean Dubosc's word on a matter is not one to be relied upon. This Yankee Ben——"

"Jean gave me his proper name——" cried the corporal.

"Ah!" and as the exclamation broke from him, the girl's eyes fixed themselves upon him in a gaze the intensity of which startled him. "And that name, corporal?"

"It was the name of your father—Benedict Elington!"

As he made the accusation, Clancy did not look at the girl. He had a sudden consciousness of the brutality of his accusation made in such circumstances, and he almost wished that he had never introduced the subject. For a moment there was silence between them, then the girl spoke.

"You believe Jean Dubosc?" she asked with a self-possession that he found amazing.

Clancy shrugged his shoulders, and unconsciously his manner hardened. "What else can I do? When the half-breed told me the story, you yourself had already betrayed a certain knowledge of myself or rather of my name; and from the way you introduced me to your father, and your father's interest in my father's story, it became evident to me, on reflection, that to both of you it was a name of more than ordinary significance."

"Granted," answered the girl.

"And Jean Dubosc's story threw a lurid light on that significance!"

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"I can well believe it," answered Mollie Elkington quietly.

The corporal was again conscious of a wave of anger, occasioned by her calmness. "Can't you see what it meant to me?" he cried, starting to his feet. "Can't you imagine how I feel? Is it nothing to you that through our fathers you and I should stand in such a tragic relation—my father dead; and your father seeking the gold for which my father was slain, whilst I—whilst I——"

"Risk your life to save me!" Mollie Elkington stood upright confronting him. "You would not say that, I know. But it is the truth. You risk your life for the daughter of the man who, as you are convinced, is the betrayer of your father. Do you think I cannot understand what that means? I did not know until just now that you were tortured with these thoughts. I said, just now, that I was grateful, but now—but now——"

She broke off, her eyes shining, her face, with the firelight upon it, eloquent of deep emotion; and as Clancy met her gaze, into his heart surged a feeling that momentarily swept his perplexity aside, and made his father's death seem remote and unimportant. The girl held out her hands appealingly, and suddenly she spoke again.

"You are mistaken," she cried. "I assure you that you are mistaken. I beg of you to accept my word. My father will tell you the story, and you will know then that he is not the man who was your father's partner, that——"

"But he knew my father, and Jean Dubosc——"

"Jean Dubosc was your prisoner. He played you very cleverly. He was in league with our guides; and he no doubt knew that if he could get in touch with

them they would save him. So he told you that story to induce you to follow, as you did——"

"And the story was not true? It had no element of truth in it?"

"It had an element of truth—just an element!" owned the girl slowly. "But my father will explain. I do not know the whole story. He——"

"This gold?" cried the corporal. "The gold which your father is after—the fortune which he offered to share with me; that is the gold that my father and——his partner found ten long years ago?"

"Yes!" answered Mollie Elkington quietly. "It is the same gold."

"And you ask me to believe——"

"I do," said the girl in a tense voice. She took a step forward. "You have done so much, believing—what you believed; now I ask you to believe otherwise; to accept my word that you are mistaken."

"But——"

"Oh," cried the girl almost petulantly. "I know how the argument would run against belief on your part; how strong the case is for the truth of Dubosc's story. I do not need you to point that out to me. What I am asking of you now is that you shall believe me, whom you are serving so nobly; that you shall just accept my simple word that you are mistaken. Look at me. Do you think that I would lie to you in such circumstances? I owe to you my deliverance; do you think that I would deceive you?"

"Before God, no!" cried Clancy impulsively, crushing back suspicion, and his eyes kindling as he looked on her beautiful face full of earnest appeal, and on her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Then you will accept my word?"

"Yes!" he said simply. "Yes!"

As he said the word the girl smiled suddenly. "Thank

you," she said quietly. "I am glad that you can do that. If you had not been able——"

"What?" he asked quickly.

"I should have been forced to tell you the little I know to pacify your mind; but I would never have forgiven you—never!"

Clancy had a quite sudden conviction that to have gone unforgiven by the girl standing there with shining eyes and with radiant face would have been a calamity, but he did not say so. Instead, feeling that for the moment he could not trust himself to speak, he turned very deliberately and began to make up the fire. When he had finished he looked round again.

"I think we had better get what rest we can, whilst we have the opportunity, Miss Elkington. When the snow ceases it will be heavy going, and we shall need all our strength."

"Yes," she replied simply, and accepted the rabbit-skin wrap which he offered her.

She rolled herself in the warm covering and lay down on a bed of balsam well within the heat radiating from the fire; and Clancy, seating himself, stared thoughtfully at the glowing logs. When he had said that he did not believe the girl would deceive him, he had spoken from his heart; but he was more mystified than ever. She had offered him no explanation; she had admitted things that pointed directly to her father's guilt; and yet she had affirmed his blamelessness in relation to Sir Terence's disappearance. That, at any rate, she really believed in her father's innocence, he was convinced; but it was a little mystifying that she should have volunteered no explanation of the suspicious circumstances in which he appeared to be involved. She had simply asked for his faith, and he had given it; and until circumstances compelled him, if they ever did, he would not recall it, nor would he

question the wisdom of trusting her on so slight a ground as her mere affirmation provided.

He sat for quite a long time, the storm shaking the tree-tops, the snow whirling round in a blinding wrack. So long as the blizzard continued, he had no fear of pursuit ; and when it was over his trail would be effectively hidden. Only by some piece of ill-fortune would the Kogmollocks stumble on his new trail ; and for the moment he dismissed them from his mind, where a new problem was already looming. How was he to find Elkington and the two half-breeds ?

In a country so vast, with the snow to hide every vestige of the trail from the lake, the task before him seemed more than hopeless. The half-breeds with their stolen team of Eskimo dogs would travel quickly ; and though for the present, as he had explained to Mollie Elkington, they must be driven to camp, once the snow ceased, and the hard dry weather of the Arctic set in, they would move at a rate in comparison with which his own progress would seem the merest crawl.

There were other considerations also. The food supply on the sled there was very limited. It would not meet the needs of two people for very long, certainly not for a chase that might be extended to many weeks. Unless they encountered game, the risks of starvation would be very great ; and even with game their diet would become monotonous to a degree and scurvy would all the while be hovering to make them its victims.

And yet he knew that Mollie Elkington would never consent to desert her father without any attempt to save him. He might point out the risks ; but he was certain that the girl would face them a thousand times rather than play the coward's part. His heart warmed at the thought of her courage ; but he did not conceal from himself that to seek the three men in the Arctic wilderness would be no less than folly. He found him-

self calculating the distance to the nearest H.B.C. Stores and to the nearest police post.

"It must be all three hundred and fifty miles," he muttered. "I might take the girl there and come back to look for Elkington."

His mind, however, supplied the objection that Mollie Elkington would make to this course. She would say it would be too late, that in the weeks that must necessarily elapse before he could take up the search her father would have been done to death by the half-breeds or deserted to perish miserably in the snow. His knowledge of Dubosc supported that objection. The man was already a murderer, and would have no scruples in the matter; whilst Anton was in no way to be depended upon for any less drastic course, as he had already proved in originating the scheme by which Clancy himself had been left to perish in the wild. The two half-breeds would not be inclined to burden themselves with Elkington for very long. Moved by cupidity, they would proceed to extreme measures to extort the American's secret from him; and once the secret was in their possession, their victim's life would not be worth a moment's purchase.

The corporal was assured of that; and consider the situation how he would, always his mind came round to one point and that was the girl, and he must risk their lives in the endeavour to find Mr. Elkington and to save him from the half-breeds. The risks were tremendously grave, and Clancy's soul shook within him as he thought of what might happen to the girl in the inhospitable wilderness where death lurked at every turn in the trail; where hunger would stalk them with silent feet; where the bitter cold would strike like an assassin's dagger at ill-nourished bodies. He himself had faced these risks more than once with a careless mind; and even now would

have done so with a comparative light-heartedness had he been following a solitary trail ; but the thought of the girl somehow unnerved him. He knew that the pursuit which the girl would insist upon would be to gamble two lives for one ; yet he was convinced that the stake must be made. He glanced thoughtfully towards the recumbent figure by the fire. Her face was hidden from him in the folds of the rabbit-skin wrap, but momentarily he visioned it as he had first seen it in the moonlight, softly beautiful with the dark eyes flashing indignantly and a moment later filled with dancing laughter ; and as he thought how she had venturesomely called a bull-moose out of the woods to her gun, he knew that whilst she might, like the majority of her sex, be momentarily overcome by calamity, there was in her a strength of spirit that would face risks and the long trail of endurance unflinchingly and uncomplainingly.

"It won't be the slightest use warning you," he whispered, looking towards her still form, "I know it won't ; you'll go all the same."

He resolved, however, that she should not take that trail blindly. Before they started he would lay the risks before her, emphasizing them to the utmost. He would leave nothing out—neither the darkness, the cold, nor the possibility of starvation ; and then if she chose to go, so be it. All the risks would be taken, and if they became destructive realities, well at least the girl and he would die together. It was chill consolation, but having reached that conclusion, he rose, heaped sticks upon the fire, wrapped himself in a blanket, and resolutely composed himself to sleep.

Twice in the course of the next few hours he awakened and replenished the fire. The girl, exhausted no doubt by the experiences and exertions of the previous night, still lay in the position he had last seen her,

though now a thin covering of snow hid the rabbit-skin wrap. The wind was still howling through the trees and driving the small hard snow in solid sheets before it ; and on the second awakening the increasing dusk told him that the short Northland day was drawing to a close. Though he was unconscious of hunger, he chopped some of the frozen moose-meat with his hatchet and set it with beans in a pot at the edge of the fire in preparation for the evening meal, then lay down once more. This time the sleep that was granted to him was a short one, and when he awakened for the third time the wind was dying down. The snow had ceased, and looking up between the trees he caught the cold gleam of stars. He turned towards his companion. Mollie Elkington was sitting up, shaking the snow from her parka.

"Awake ? " he cried cheerfully, as he jumped up. "I hope you have slept well."

"Better than ever I did in a down bed," she answered with a smile.

"That's good !" he laughed. "Now I think we will eat. The meal should be nearly ready."

He looked into the pot, put it in the red embers of the fire ; and whilst the girl rose and shook the snow from the robe he busied himself with the simple preparations that the meal entailed.

"Wilderness fare !" he said, laughingly, as he set a tin-plate of the stew before her. "I am afraid I can't offer variety, but at any rate it is nourishing."

During the meal little was said ; but when it was finished, Clancy, after walking to the edge of the wood to obtain a clear look at the sky, said : "It is possible to make a start now ; but before we go I think it is desirable that we should know where we are making for. I——"

"My father !" broke in the girl impulsively.

"Yes. I have been thinking about him. He is not in the most desirable hands, if, as you think, Dubosc and Anton carried him off. We ought to do something; but you must understand the risks any effort on our part will involve."

Briefly, but without minimizing them in the least, he set those risks before her—the risks of a blind trail, of the bitter cold, of the inadequate food supply, and of death from hunger and privation. The girl listened without moving, her eyes fixed on his face, and at the end she asked, "You are not afraid?"

"For myself, no. I am inured to the wilderness and have taken similar chances before. But I am afraid for you."

"And I am afraid for my father!" was the quick reply.

"Yes!" Clancy was silent for a moment, then he said quietly, "There is another way. We might make for the nearest post, where I can leave you in safety; then I might return and hunt for——"

"But that would take time," interrupted Mollie, voicing the objection that in his own mind he had anticipated. "And I am sure there is no time to lose. Those men will not deal gently with my father. They are brutal, and I am sure will adopt any means to gain their end. You must not think of me! We must follow them. We must save him before—before——" Her voice faltered and her eyes were dimmed with sudden tears as the tragic possibilities of the situation were borne upon her.

"Yes," answered the corporal. "I share that conviction, but I could not make a decision without letting you understand what terrible risks the pursuit will involve for yourself."

"I could not bear to live, if I left him to die," said the girl passionately.

The corporal nodded. Miss Elkington's devotion to her father moved him profoundly. She was prepared to put her life on the hazard to save her father, as he had expected, and he himself could do no less.

"Then we go on the trail of Dubosc and Anton." He broke off, and looked between the trees into the open which showed greyly under the stars. "If we only knew which direction to follow. It may take us days to pick up the trail; and every hour is precious to your father—and to us!"

"Perhaps I can help there," cried Mollie quickly, as a thought struck her. "Those men carried away my father in order to learn the secret of the gold——"

"That is unquestionable, I think."

"Then he would have to lead them to the place; for we buried the plan at the lake-side when we found that Anton and Montana Joe were treacherous. But my father carried the map in his mind, and, as he is sure to have become very anxious about me, if he thought these men would release him to find me, he would lead them to the place as quickly as possible."

"Yes," replied Clancy hopefully. "That is more than probable!"

"And the place cannot be far from here. Just beyond the camping-place where we were attacked there is a river, which we passed the other day. From the mouth of it two hills can be seen——"

"I saw them from across the lake," interrupted the corporal.

"They mark the place my father will have to make for if he leads the men to the gold, as he certainly will. If we make that way, we may overtake them in time to save my father. Or if these dreadful men turn him adrift, we may meet him before he dies of cold and hunger. He will be consumed with fear for

me, and will make directly for the camping-place where——”

Clancy interrupted her. “Miss Elkington, I think you are absolutely right. We will start at once. We will gain several hours if we go now instead of waiting for the morning, and in addition we shall get out of the stamping grounds of the Kogmollocks, who may take a fancy to try and find you. With a definite destination to aim for, things are not quite so hopeless, as I thought.”

Without further words he began to pack the sled; and in twenty minutes they had harnessed themselves and were pulling out to the fire-cleared space between the woods that led down to the lake. As they reached it the snow-covered plain of the latter opened out in flat greyness, and with the dying wind behind them swirling the loose snow about their feet in cloudy eddies, they moved towards it; whilst above the trees, across the lake the waning moon slowly lifted itself to guide them on their way.

CHAPTER XV

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

ABOUT the time that Clancy and Mollie Elkington took the trail for the lake, Jean Dubosc rolled out of his blankets in the camp which the storm had driven them to make, and, crossing the fire-space of it, dropped on his knees in the snow beside the pinioned form of Mr. Elkington. Drawing the blanket on one side, he stared into the white man's face. It had a stark look; and whilst the eyes were open, it was clear to Jean Dubosc that they did not recognize him. Then, whilst he stared, the starkness vanished from the face, and John B. Elkington laughed

suddenly with delirious laughter. The laughter was so unexpected that Jean Dubosc was quite startled, and drew back swiftly.

"Mon Dieu!" he whispered. "Mon Dieu!"

A babble of meaningless words flowed from the sick man's lips, and for a moment the half-breed listened intently, as if hoping to discover some sequence, then he gave a gesture of despair and addressed Anton.

"Always eet ees like dat, Anton. Words like zee leaves dat blow in autumn; but wit' no meanin'. Ah t'ink sometime dat he weel of zee gold speak; but no, eet ees not so, though all zee time Ah wait an' leesten."

"Dat was a mos' unlucky blow you give heem, Jean, with zee rifle. Eet shake hees brain-pan too mooch, an' when he came to himself, an' fin' dat zee girl ees not here, eet ees big shock to heem, an' he go sick in hees mind."

"An' as he say, he hav' not zee paper on heem, an' zee whereabouts of zee gold ees locked up in hees all-gone crack brain. *Sacré bleu!*"

Dubosc stared down at the delirious man, with a helpless look upon his scarred face. Here was a situation beyond all his anticipations. He had carried off Mr. Elkington, ruthlessly leaving the girl to the uncertain mercies of the Kogmollocks, because the American had the secret of the gold for which his covetous soul craved; and now all his endeavours threatened to prove vain. Delivered from the restraining influence of Montana Joe, all the cruelty of his nature would have had play to compel the American to declare his secret; but in this situation no devilry would avail him. Elkington's delirium was a check-mate that for the time made any further move quite impossible. He ground his teeth as he looked down on the helpless man, and a murderous expression came

on his brutal face. One hope only he had, and that was that before long the delirium would pass ; then, as he promised himself, the white man should tell or should suffer the pangs of the damned.

The knowledge that the recovery of his prisoner was the one way to the gold that he desired restrained him from immediate violence, and even begot a kind of solicitude for the sick man, whom he fed with hot soup from time to time as carefully as a woman feeds a sick child, and always he listened to the babble of delirium, that came from Elkington's lips. But, as he had said to Anton, not once since they had made camp had the sick man so much as referred to the gold.

And he had other cause for anxiety. Though they had managed to escape from the Kogmollocks during the attack, Dubosc had a feeling that they were by no means safe from pursuit. He knew well the value that the Northern tribes attached to their dog teams, and he had an uneasy suspicion that some further attempt to recover the stolen team would be made. In view of that, he felt that it was not wise to linger in the neighbourhood ; and yet, convinced as he was that the gold was somewhere in the vicinity, he was reluctant to leave it and, with the ceasing of the storm, he discussed the matter with his companion.

"Anton," he said, "eet ees like dis : eef we stay, zee Kogmollock peoples may find us, an' den we have to fight for our lives, *certainment* ; but eef we go an' tak' M'sieu Elkington with us, maybe he die ; or we go far away from zee place of gold, an' havin' not zee stores to come back, we lose zee gold altogeder. *Diable !* "

"*Oui !* " agreed Anton. "Dat blow you give heem ees one big meestake. You strike heem too dam' hard like one fool, an' now——"

"*Sacré bleu !* " broke in Dubosc, starting to his

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feet. "You talk to me like dat! Ah not hav' eet. You keep zee still tongue in zee mouth or Ah keel you, Anton."

Anton was no sheep. The savage note in the other's voice stirred his own passionate nature. He also leaped to his feet. "You mak' keel," he shouted angrily. "Ah see about dat!"

Before Dubosc could anticipate it, Anton's mitted hand shot out, all his weight behind it, and caught the other on the face. Dubosc, caught unprepared, went down like a poled ox, and scrambled out of the snow a raging devil. "Ah keel you now, Anton, you vile dog!" he cried, and gnashing his teeth, hunting-knife in hand he flung himself upon the other.

They were evenly matched; and though Dubosc was a second or two earlier in drawing steel, it made little difference; for Anton leaped aside from the rushing assault, and by the time his antagonist turned he had his own knife in hand. Then, flaming out of the sudden passion of undisciplined natures, began a combat beneath the cold stars that was to be to the death.

For a moment they circled round each other in the snow, savage of aspect, Dubosc snarling like a wolf. Then Anton rushed in and tried to grapple with one arm whilst he struck with the other. But his opponent caught the descending arm with his empty hand and it was only with an adroit twist that Anton avoided the countering stroke. Dubosc tore himself free, leaped back a couple of steps, then himself rushed in to the attack. The knives clashed together, but quick as lightning Dubosc struck again. It was a glancing stroke that pricked Anton not very deep, tearing from him a savage "*Sacré bleu!*"

Conscious that first blood was his, his antagonist laughed triumphantly and drew clear for a new rush.

But the slight wound, whilst it stung Anton, made him cautious. Backing a yard or two, he watched every motion of his adversary, awaiting the attack, turning slowly on his heel in the snow, whilst Dubosc circled round him as wolves circle round a moose before leaping in for the death-stroke. A minute passed, the two eyeing each other warily, whilst the heavy silence was broken only by the sick man's ravings and the soft crunch of moccasined feet in the snow, then Dubosc rushed in once more.

The other was ready for him, and his own free hand caught the attacker's fighting hand. In the same second his right arm flew back to deliver the death-blow. But, swift as thought, Dubosc jabbed his forehead into the other's face, and, as Anton staggered from the unexpected impact, wrenched his own knife-hand free. Then as Anton's stroke missed him he closed, and gripping him, strove to get his knife home. They fell, rolling over and over in the snow, fighting, snarling like beasts, each thirsting for the other's life. In their struggle they rolled into the fire, and by mutual impulse broke free, and jumping to their feet, stood apart with the width of the fire between them.

Both were gasping as a result of their terrific exertions, and on the knife of each the blood was already freezing, but neither gave any sign of yielding or of a desire to make peace. The snarling look was on Dubosc's face, and his blackened teeth were bared like a wolf's; whilst Anton's dark eyes blazed with sombre passion. For a little while they stood thus, confronting each other silently, the fire-lit snow under their feet, the dark shadow of the woods about them, overhead the chilly stars; two men who had sloughed all that civilization meant, as the snake sloughs its skin; and who, driven by primordial passion, lusted

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to slay. Then Dubosc, conscious of superiority and with his breathing almost normal again, cried out mockingly :

“ *Prêt !* ”

Slowly he began to circle round the fire towards his enemy, and as slowly, Anton retreated before him. He was as yet in no way afraid of Jean, and his retreat was but a strategic one, his fighting sense dictating that if possible he should deny the other the advantage of the attack. Dubosc quickened his pace and Anton followed suit. Quicker they went, and Dubosc cried out a taunting word :

“ Poltroon ! ”

Anton's answer to the taunt was a leap across the fire that brought him within a yard of his antagonist. With a second leap he threw himself upon Dubosc, and as he leaped he struck. The stroke was not a good one, but it cut through the other's mitten, and hurt the knife hand ; but, at the same time, Anton's wrist twisted, and the knife slipped from his grasp. As it dropped into the snow Dubosc gave a howl of triumph, and, before the other could stoop to recover, kicked it into the fire. Anton, weaponless, aimed a savage blow with his fist, a blow that made the other reel, then quickly he began to run towards the sled where the rifles were stacked. Dubosc divined his purpose and with incredible swiftness changed the hold on his knife, and holding it by the point flung back his arm. Anton had almost reached the sled, when, like a flash of lightning, the knife gleamed in the firelight as it sped across the intervening space.

It caught Anton under the left shoulder, and piercing clean through the mackinaw that he was wearing and through the intervening flesh, found the heart. With a single cry that sounded weirdly through the dark woods, the unfortunate man sagged suddenly

and slipped into the snow, where for a moment he lay twitching and then became quite still.

Breathing heavily, Jean Dubosc circled the fire and approached his late comrade. For a moment he stood staring at the dead man, a dark look in his sombre eyes. "*Bête !*" he snarled "*Bête !* You would me hav' shoot an' now you have died !"

Callously he turned the dead man over, and after pulling out his knife and wiping it on the other's clothing, went back to the fire, and seated himself with his back to the corpse. For a little while he stared darkly into the glowing logs, his face indicative of troubled thought, then the frown above his eyes lifted a little, and he nodded his head.

"Dat Anton, he ees too clevaire ; an' so he ees keel. But no mattaire, dere weel be zee more gold for me."

He crouched there making his plans, glancing now and again at the delirious Elkington, and more than once uttering his thoughts aloud.

"When zee madness leave heem, Ah mak' heem speak, Ah mak' heem speak double-quick time."

A moment later his thoughts ranged on the backward trail. "Eef dose dam' Kogmollock dey comes, Ah weel be in one beeg hole ! In zee mornin' Ah weel pull out eef zee snow not begin again, an' Ah weel find one good place to mak' camp, till ze sickness leave M'sieu' Elkington, then——"

The rest of the thought shaped itself only in his dark brain. He sat on, until suddenly the silence forced itself upon his consciousness. He looked round. The sick man's ravings were for the moment hushed, and a quite terrible stillness seemed to have fallen on the world. He crouched closer to the fire, and once more gave himself up to thought. A little time passed. Elkington still remained silent ; and except for the

faint crackling and seething of wood on the fire, the world was deadly still. A faint noise of movement sounded behind him ; and with a scared look on his face he swung round, and stared at the dead man. Anton lay exactly as he had fallen close by the sled, but Jean Dubosc stared at him with eyes in which for a single moment stark terror gleamed. Like all his race he was superstitious by nature, and the slight noise awakened dark terrors in his soul. Anton was dead, but—whilst he still stared with terrified gaze, the sound of movement was repeated ; and lifting his eyes a little in the shadow of the trees he caught the gleam of eyes.

“ Poof ! ” he said with a new courage. “ A dog ! ”

But the fear that had been awakened, though he tried to banish it, remained. As the night deepened it grew more pronounced, and he crept closer to the friendly fire. He began to wish that Anton and he had not quarrelled, and on the occasions when he rose to minister to his captive, he steadily averted his gaze from the dead man.

Once when Mr. Elkington's babble began anew he crossed to him and, slipping to his knees, listened carefully. The sick man's ravings had grown more connected than they had been, and the sequences of words were longer ; but the delirium had to do with the American's past life, in some sentences with the life of his boyhood, and not once was there any mention of that which the half-breed burned to hear. After a time, convinced of the uselessness of listening, he returned to his old place, and lighting a pipe once more gave himself up to reflection.

He tried hard not to think of the freezing corpse behind him, for to think of the dead in such vast solitudes as the North environs men with, is to open the gates to superstitious terrors. But Anton would

not be shut out of his mind. Again and again his reflections led him back to the dead man, till to his own primitive mind it began to seem as if some invisible power was leading him that way. Little by little superstitious apprehension mounted within him. He was brutal by nature, and he had killed before, but never had he had to sit in the tremendous solitude with his victim close at hand. The mystic stories of childhood began to throng in his brain; the ghostly lore of the voyageurs heard by the campfires of the wilderness ran through his mind; and a scene in which a French priest had exorcised the spirit from the cabin of a man whose weakened mind was burdened by the thought that he was haunted, flashed like a picture before his eyes. The priest had believed in the haunting spirit, and to the man it had been terribly real. Suppose that Anton——

A sudden chill ran through his blood, there was a prickling at the roots of his hair, and into his sombre eyes there leaped a look of terror. Wave on wave the cold *aura* swept through his veins, and in a very agony of apprehension he looked swiftly over his shoulder. The dead Anton had not moved, and the sight of the body afforded him cold consolation, and brought on access of courage.

"*Sacré bleu!*" he cried suddenly. "Ah weel him remove. Maybe zee wolves weel him eet."

He rose sharply from his seat, and running across the snow-covered space, before his new-found courage could evaporate, he gripped the collar of the mackinaw, and dragged the dead man into the shadow of the trees and out of sight from any point of the camp. Then he hurried back to the fire, just as the sick man once more broke into his delirious babble.

The slayer welcomed that unmeaning stream of words. It banished the menacing silence of the wilder-

ness and was like a friendly voice in the solitude. But presently the delirious spasm passed; and as the babbling voice was hushed, once more the silence impinged upon the half-breed's consciousness, and again his uneasiness began to mount. New fancies came to his tortured mind. He felt as if something were watching him from the black shadow of the wood. His blood chilled again; and now when he looked round Anton's body was not there to afford him any assurance that it had not moved, and as he stared into the blackness he visioned strange eyes, formless things.

"*Mon Dieu !*" he whispered stammeringly. "*Mon . . . Dieu !*"

There were sounds now, real sounds and not those of phantasy. Soft steps that seemed to come from the shadows where he had dragged the dead man. Crouching close to the fire, he stared into the blackness with terror-stricken eyes, and in that moment his brutish brain tottered on the verge of sheer insanity. In his superstitious fear he had quite forgotten the husky whose prowling in the wood had given rise to the sounds which he had heard previously; and in a very delirium of fear, he sank in the snow, his eyes glaring with a glare akin to that of madness, waiting, waiting for the hidden cause of his terror to manifest itself.

The sounds of movement, mere rustlings in the snowy darkness, ceased; and still he waited . . . and waited! Then suddenly on the tense stillness broke a weird, long-drawn melancholy howl—a sound of most mournful quality—unutterably startling to ears that are strangers to it. But to Dubosc, who had heard the sound before, it brought deliverance from his immediate fears.

"*Tiens !*" he cried, as he sprang from his crouching position. "Dat dam' husky!"

Even as he spoke, the dog that had given the death-

howl stepped slinkingly into the circle of the firelight, as if for it also the darkness had its terrors, Jean Dubosc cursed roundly ; but though it cringed before him the dog refused to leave the firelight, and once it looked towards the darkness, its hair bristling, its fangs bared in a snarl. That action brought the half-breed's fears back in a flood. The dog was afraid of what the wood held ; and with a sudden feeling that to stay in this place of terrors until day broke would be impossible, he began rapidly to pack. That done, he rolled the now-quiescent sick man in his sleeping bag and bound him on the sled ; then routing the other huskies from their sleeping places in the snow, he harnessed them to the traces. In a little over twenty minutes he was ready for the trail, and setting the dogs' heads in the opposite direction to that where the dead Anton lay, he gave one look back into the shadows that had bred stark terror in his soul ; then he cried to the dogs, " Moosh ! Moosh ! "

Before him was a small barren whose expanse showed greyly in the darkness, and down that he broke trail, fleeing from the shadows that clustered in the forest, but carrying the spring of fear in his own black superstitious heart.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INCIDENT OF THE TRAIL

WITH the dying wind behind them, and with the moon to light their way, Clancy and Mollie Elkington made a fair pace to the lake-side. When they reached it, along the shore where the wind had swept the snow clear they beheld a long stretch of ice, gleaming bleakly in the moonlight. Doffing the snowshoes, and stacking them on the sled, they took it fear-

lessly, turning down the lake in the direction of the camping-place where the Kogmollocks had made their attack. In a little over three hours they arrived at the spot, and whilst the girl waited on the ice, Clancy moved shoreward, to make an examination of the ground. He found no signs of any return on the part of the two half-breeds; but he found the bones of Montana, picked clean by wolves and scattered over the snow. With a shudder, he turned and went back to the waiting girl.

"There are no signs of any return," he said briefly. "I think we had better continue on our way."

"Yes!" said Mollie a little despondently. "You are quite sure that they have not been back."

"Quite sure," answered Clancy. "I never expected they would have been."

"No! But I thought that perhaps my father——"

Her voice faltered, and the corporal hastened to offer a consoling thought. "Your father is not a free agent," he said quickly. "He cannot please himself; and I have no doubt that that brace of rascals will keep watchful eyes lifting. They will not want their treasury to run away."

"But if they stoop to extreme measures——" began the girl. "Dubosc is an evil man, and he may decide to waste no time."

"That is quite likely," agreed Clancy. "But in that case your father has the game in his hands to a quite considerable extent. He can take his own time in leading the two half-breeds to the place where the gold is, and once in the immediate neighbourhood, if he chooses he can walk round it for a week, and fix his own time for the actual discovery. He will know that his life probably depends on his action in that matter, and will use the expedient of delay to his own ends."

"Yes," answered the girl. "That is so. My father

and I had that idea in our minds when we buried the plan. But I cannot help feeling afraid for him. Those men are so evil, Montana Joe had grown afraid of them."

"In this business they know, or think they know, which side their bread is buttered. They won't do any mortal injury to Mr. Elkington until he reveals the place of the gold. And before that we ourselves will be in the neighbourhood to help him. Those rascals won't be expecting us, and probably we shall be able to surprise them."

"Please God we may," said Molly fervently.

They moved on again, making a good pace on the ice; and in the course of some three hours they came to the place where the river which they were making for flowed into the lake. Its banks were precipitous; and between them the wind had driven as through a funnel, sweeping the snow from the ice. The corporal did not like the look of that ice, but with the necessity for speed driving him, he decided to risk it. At the junction with the lake the ice was rough, and the going difficult; but after a little time they reached a smoother ice, and moved forward quickly. In a little time they left the high banks, and, rounding a bend of the river, reached a district where the timber grew sparsely, and where the first gust of a wind buffeted them in the face, and lifted the powdery snow in little spirals about their feet.

Then they came near to disaster. The snow between the lower banks lay on the frozen river as on the shore. Hard as shot, powdery as fine sugar, dry as a bone, except for its colour it resembled the fine sand that is found on the dunes, and the use of snow-shoes was an absolute necessity, since without a packed trail the sled would have had to be dragged through it instead of over it. Both were bending to the task, face held

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down from the wind, shoulders bent forward in strenuous effort, when quite suddenly Clancy felt the trail sag beneath his feet. He cried a warning and abruptly turned aside. But his warning came too late. There was an ominous sound of cracking and splintering, a sharp cry from the girl, and he swung round to find a surge of dark water licking up the snow about her.

It was no time for gentle measures. With a tremendous effort he jerked the girl and sled clear of the treacherous place. Mollie Elkington was thrown clean off her feet, and rolling over in the snow was hit on the head by the long sled runner. Without any sound beyond a sigh, she passed into unconsciousness. Loosing himself from the traces, Clancy stooped over her. A little trickle of blood showing under the hood of the parka told him what had happened, but one glance sufficed for that. His second glance was at her feet. They were wet to the ankles, and as he realized that, he knew there was need for desperate haste.

Flinging the traces from her he carried her to the bank, then running back he dragged the sled, the runners of which were already freezing in the slush, to the shore. Unpacking it in haste, he found the rabbit-skin robe and wrapped the girl's feet in it, noting as he did so that the frost crystals were forming on the wet moccasins, stiffening them like a board. He looked round. A small dead pine lifted itself against the moon not a dozen yards away. Axe in hand he attacked it swiftly, yet cautiously, knowing that in the intense cold the hard steel might shiver like glass. Within quarter of an hour the splutter and crackle of a fire filled the night with homely sound; then once more he gave his undivided attention to the unconscious girl.

The trickle of blood under the hood had ceased, staunching no doubt by the cold. He did not unwrap her feet, but carried her just as she was to the fire, laid

her in the snow for a minute or two, feet close to the yet young fire, whilst he stretched a blanket for a screen against the drift of icy wind blowing across the open country ; and that done he once more gave attention to the fire, feeding it with small dry twigs, until the bigger chunks caught and broke into leaping flame. Then without so much as a glance at the girl's white face, he stripped the rabbit-skin from her feet.

The moccasins gleamed with ice, and were solid as a board. With his knife he chipped the ice away, and thrust her feet towards the fire to soften the leather a little. Then he cut the lacings, and with an effort wrenched the moccasins off, and followed that by stripping the thick socks and heavy woollen stockings that she wore. It was no easy task, and finally he was forced to cut them from her, but in a little time a pair of shapely bare feet rested on the blanket which he had set for them. They were almost marble white, and with bitter fear assailing him he set to work. Grabbing handfuls of the hard snow-crystals, he rubbed the bare skin of the feet with an almost savage energy. First one and then the other, sparing neither himself nor the girl, all his attention concentrated on his task, with never a moment to spare for a glance at her face. Kneeling on the blanket, one foot on his lap, he was so engaged when he felt the foot squirm, and heard a little cry, and, looking swiftly, saw that her eyes were open.

"It hurts?" he said. "You can feel it?"

"Yes," was the reply. "It hurts very much."

He dropped that foot on the blanket, and attacked the other.

"That too?" he asked as he scrubbed with snow.

"No—o!"

"My God!" he whispered, and scrubbed with desperate energy, fear of the issue pounding at his heart, for he knew that the few minutes' delay in that intense

cold, whilst getting the fire going might cost her a foot.

The sweat was standing on his forehead, and was moist on his body under his heavy clothing when the girl cried out with the pain of returning circulation.

"Thank Heaven!" he said fervently, and continued his exertions, kneading the flesh, giving minute attention to her toes, scrubbing her ankles fiercely; then, when she complained of stinging pains all through her feet, he desisted, and gave her precise instructions.

"Sit up if you feel able—you had a knock on the head from the sled, you know, and I haven't had time to fix that yet. Rub your feet and knead them carefully all over. Let them absorb the heat of the fire slowly, as gradually as possible. When you feel them glowing all over we shall know that they are all right. You've had a narrow shave of going lame for the rest of your days. . . . I'm going to make hot tea."

He moved away, found the camp kettle, and began to fill it with snow, and that done, set it over the fire. Mollie Elkington followed his instructions carefully, now and again glanced towards him with a look in her eyes of which she was entirely unaware, a look that was something more than a silent expression of gratitude. Every day, every hour almost plunged her more deeply in his debt, brought with it some new service on his part, lacking which she must have slipped into downright disaster if not to death. And never a sign of the fact did he give, and always he was moved by extreme concern for her well-being, caring little apparently for himself. The kettle filled, he suddenly grabbed snow and began to scrub his own hands. Looking up he caught her eyes fixed upon him, and smiled at her reassuringly.

"Chilled!" he said. "I don't want to lose my trigger-finger."

She smiled back, and a little flush crept up her face,

as once more she bent over her tingling feet. For five minutes perhaps he continued to rub his hands, first with the dry snow, and then with flesh against flesh in front of the fire ; and at last, satisfied, slipped on his mittens, and going to the things that he had tossed from the sled, began to search for something. In a few minutes he returned with a pair of moccasins, man's size, and with heavy wool stockings and Siwash socks.

"Those belonged to the dead trapper whose goods I annexed. I am afraid you will find them rather large ; but there's no help for that. Your own stockings are ruined. It was most fortunate I discovered these at the cabin."

Mollie Elkington took them with a little laugh. "There is no doubt about the size," she answered. "Apparently small numbers are not in demand in the North."

"I think you had better put them on now, Miss Elkington. Then I will have a look at that wound on your forehead."

The girl obeyed him, and when she had adjusted the moccasin laces, he bent over her, and drew back her hood. "Lean towards the fire a little, so !"

Mollie leaned in the direction indicated to throw the light on her face, and the corporal, his mittens removed, held her head in position, one hand on the top of her head, the other supporting her chin whilst he made the examination ; and whilst she was in that position her gaze encountered his. As it did so a swift light leaped in Clancy's eye and the hot blood surged in his face. She felt the hands that held her shake, and then in hoarse earnest tones the corporal began to speak :—

"Miss Elkington——"

He checked himself as suddenly as he began, and his flush deepened, as he averted his eyes from her beautiful face.

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"Yes?" said the girl eagerly, sure in her heart of the words he had checked. "Yes?"

"It is nothing!" he said sharply. "The wound is nothing. The blood has ceased to flow, and the cut cannot be deep. I think we will not disturb it now."

He released her abruptly, and straightening himself quickly, began to add more snow to that already melting in the kettle. Then he went to the sled and began to rearrange the articles which he had unpacked in such desperate haste. Mollie Elkington watched him smilingly, a soft light of tenderness in her eyes. She could have sung, but did not, though her heart was beating riotously. It needed little feminine intuition to divine the words that Clancy had so suddenly checked, and though in her secret heart she yearned to hear them, it deepened her already great respect for him that he had the strength to be silent. His business about the sled lasted longer than there was need for; and at last, as naturally as she could, she called out to him:

"The water is boiling, Corporal Clancy."

The flush was still on his face, but there was no sign of embarrassment in his manner, as he approached the fire and made the tea. But when he handed to her the steaming mug for her to drink from first, their eyes met again, and though no word was spoken each for one moment glimpsed the soul of the other, and won the wordless knowledge that they had entered into a new relation to each other. There was no jest or laughter on Clancy's lips as he took the mug from her hands to drink in his turn. His manner was austere and formal, and when he spoke his voice had an official ring.

"I think we must start again soon, Miss Elkington. I do not like this wind that is blowing from the open. It may bring more snow. The farther we are on our way before that can happen the better."

"It is for you to command," answered the girl lightly ; in spite of her anxieties, a little amused at the new tone in which he addressed her.

"Then if you feel fit, as soon as we have finished the tea we will start. I will make the sled ready."

Again he busied himself about the sled, and Mollie Elkington watched him with thoughtful eyes, wondering how long he would be able to maintain the silence which he had imposed upon himself. Then she glanced round the dim snow-covered landscape, and knew that as they moved in the vast solitude, inimical to man and even more inimical to woman, in the daily intimacy of the trail, the attraction each held for the other must more and more assert itself, drawing them closer until the barriers of silence must be wrenched aside. Her heart beat more quickly as she thought of the coming of that moment, and she smiled a little at her own anticipations. Then, seeing the sled was almost packed, she rose and prepared herself for the trail.

A few minutes afterwards they resumed their march, following now the open country along the river-bank. The wind blowing from the broad wilderness, increased, and lifting the fine snow, sensibly increased the difficulties of the journey. The pressure of it against them was like an additional weight to the sled, and the loose snow itself increased the task of hauling. Little whirling eddies of snow played about them, falling not from the air but lifted from the ground. Sometimes, when a heavier gust came, the snow was driven before it in a cloud, utterly obliterating the vague contours about them, and half smothering them in white granular dust of frost.

Then the low moon dropped out of sight, and a darkness that could be felt descended upon them, and to the girl it seemed that, mere shadows of living people, they moved in a world given up to frost and snow and blister-

ing wind that bit to the bone. In the deeper darkness the snow made the trail in front of them a ghostly thing. Trees occasionally lifted themselves—mere shadowy forms, and save for the crunch of the snow-shoes and the creaking of the sled, Clancy and the girl stole past, themselves silent as shadows. Nowhere else was there any moving thing; and the land was in all respects like an abode of the dead.

As the toil of the trail began to tell on muscle and nerve, and an increasing weariness resulted from the adverse pressure of material forces, which imposed an extra strain on the human machine, Mollie Elkington found herself comparing the scene to the Dante's vision of the icy lake where all humanity was frozen out of the unlucky sinners who were condemned to that frozen hell. Then, as she looked ahead and saw the stooping form of Clancy moving doggedly forward, her heart warmed suddenly, and the comparison ceased to hold. Notwithstanding the hostility of nature, the freezing breath of the wind, and the cold austerity of the snow, this world through which she toiled was not inimical at any rate to the human spirit. It called forth the best in that, and the proof of it was embodied before her eyes in her yoke-fellow. With every reason to think ill of her father, he could yet toil mightily to save him. With the temptation to avail himself of the advantage of an accidental situation, he could yet deny himself, and, with love surging to his lips, could impose silence on himself; and all the time march on as though the hostile forces of the North did not exist, practising the comradeship of the trail, and displaying character that was as kindly and tender as it was strenuous and strong.

Again her heart warmed towards him, and confessing frankly to herself that she loved him, she yearned that he should declare the love that, as she knew, had kindled

within him. A word, a look, perhaps, would move him to that declaration ; but, as with eyes shining with tenderness, she watched him toiling ahead, she resolved that she would do nothing to break down the silence that for some scruple he had imposed upon himself. Time and propinquity, or some fateful accident of the trail would do that ; and till then she would wait, though secretly sunning herself in the knowledge of his love.

CHAPTER XVII

A SLED IN THE DARKNESS

THE darkness that had followed moon-set was yielding to a greyness that heralded the dawn, when on the right a patch of pine lifted itself against the sky. One trunk, gaunt and bare, caught his eye, and as he reached it he halted.

" I think we will breakfast, Miss Elkington. A rest will do us both good ; and with daylight we shall be able to see our whereabouts. I don't want to overshoot your landmarks."

A glance at the girl told him that she was tired to exhaustion ; and he knew that for her the rest of which he had spoken was an absolute necessity. Working quickly, he cut down the blasted pine, built a fire, and spread a blanket in front of the flames.

" Wrap yourself up well, and sleep," he commanded. " I will wake you when breakfast is ready."

Mollie Elkington was inclined to demur, but he insisted. " There is nothing that you can do to help," he said. " And as soon as the pot is on, I shall take a rest myself. Remember it is of the utmost importance that you shall be able to keep the trail, and you can only do that by taking advantage of every opportunity

of rest that offers. A breakdown for even a day might have quite serious results."

Compelled to acknowledge the wisdom of his words, the girl rolled herself in the rabbit-skin rug, and lying down in the warmth of the fire, almost immediately fell asleep. Looking up from his tasks, Clancy glanced at her, saw that she was sleeping, and smiled a little.

"Pushed her too far," he thought to himself. "Only her spirit kept her going. We shall have to take a longer spell of rest than I intended to."

Having himself no desire for sleep, he seated himself by the fire, and watched the greyness lighten to dawn. The trees across the river gradually became clearly visible. The snow-covered barren to the right showed in broadening reaches, though the far boundaries of it were still lost in greyness. On the other side of the river a range of low hills lifted themselves; and whilst he watched away to the north there loomed for a moment a pair of hills that a moment later vanished, and then, as the greyness lifted, remained clear to view under the grey sky. He stared at them thoughtfully. As he guessed, they were the hills of which the girl had spoken, and somewhere in the shadow of them, along the course of the river whose frozen surface lay before him, was the place for which Elkington's captors would be making, always supposing they had succeeded in compelling the American to lead them to the place.

He had little fear that Elkington would run wide of those hills. As the girl had already suggested, Elkington's anxiety would be less for the treasure than for his daughter's welfare; and it was more than possible that he might be able to drive some bargain with the half-breeds, that would induce him to lead them directly to the gold that they coveted, that he might be free to search for his daughter. Knowing nothing of what had happened to Mr. Elkington, and never dreaming of the

death of Anton, he conjectured that, having dogs, they would move swiftly on the gold trail, once the American had made terms, or betrayed the secret, as sooner or later he would be driven to do ; for it was certain no scruple would be allowed to intervene between the half-breeds and their desire.

The more he considered the matter, the more was the need for haste impressed upon him ; and the more imperative did it seem that he should discover the whereabouts of the pair of rascals and their captive. With this in view, as the day broadened he searched the landscape in front of him very minutely for any sign of smoke that would indicate a camp. Between the distant hills and the place where he was camped was a great stretch of snow-laden woods, but nowhere was there any drift of smoke visible. Rising from his seat he walked to a stretch of rising ground, and examined the barren which undulated for miles before him, thinking that possibly, in their flight from the Kogmollocks, the half-breeds might have crossed the river. The barren, however, showed a uniform surface of white, unbroken by any camp or moving dots that would indicate travellers daring its bleak inhospitableness. Baffled in his search, he returned to the camp, and having stirred the contents of the pot, once more gave himself up to thought.

Once or twice he glanced thoughtfully towards the sled, and to the packages that represented the food supply. The latter gave ground for anxiety. If the trail they were following should prove to be an extended one, it would be necessary to economize ; and it would be almost imperative that they should find game. The latter, however, would probably not be difficult. This, as he had already proved, was a moose-country ; and the barren which he had surveyed probably carried a herd of caribou or of musk-ox, and a single kill would

put the girl and himself beyond any reach of want. But the game must be found soon, or to ensure safety they must go on short rations ; and short rations in Arctic surroundings would be a terrible handicap in the pursuit of the half-breeds.

One reflection brought to him an uplift of hope. Once he had overtaken his quarry and had dealt with the half-breeds, there would be stores in plenty, and a dog-team to haul them ; and it would be possible to make the nearest post without anything beyond the ordinary risks of winter travel. Of his ability to deal with the half-breeds when found he entertained no doubt whatever. Most probably he would be able to surprise them, since thinking of him as dead, they would be anticipating no pursuit except the possible one of the Kogmollocks.

Braced to hopefulness by this thought, he rose and once more examined the contents of the pot. The meal was almost ready, and a few minutes later he wakened the girl to partake of it. The hot food refreshed her wonderfully, and when he pointed out to her the hills that as he guessed were the hills mentioned in the buried chart, she nodded, and cried eagerly, " Yes ! Yes ! Those are the hills unquestionably. We follow this river until we reach the second fall, then we turn aside and follow a blazed trail on the left. That leads to the cliff that rises sheer and is full of gold."

Clancy for the moment was not interested in the cliff, but a thoughtful look came upon his face, which Mollie Elkington noticed. " What is it ? " she asked quickly. " Some difficulty has occurred to you ? "

" Yes," he answered frankly. " A blazed trail ten years old will be rather difficult to follow, unless it has been re-blazed."

" I never thought of that."

"No. It is not to be expected that you should. But all the same it is a fact. Fire may have swept out of existence the particular line to be followed. It is certain that the winter snows and storms will have destroyed some of the blazed trees. But it is no use worrying until we have need. Our first business is to reach the second fall, which marks where we leave the river. It is plain sailing until we reach that point ; and the sooner we are there the more time we shall have to deal with the difficulties that lie beyond."

Harnessing themselves to the sled, they once more resumed their way. The day was fully come, but the sun made no appearance ; and the uniform leadenness of the sky held the promise of further snow, whilst the wind swept cuttingly across the barren. The going was hard ; but without rest they persevered until well in the afternoon, when with the gathering dusk there came the first hint of the snow. Then the first waterfall, now a mere cascade of ice, came into view ; and as they reached it, Clancy spoke to the girl. "Would you like to rest now, Miss Elkington ; or shall we keep on until it is time to pitch camp ?"

"We will keep on," said the girl.

A little above the fall the river made a considerable bend round some low-lying hills, and Clancy was just debating in his mind whether to follow the river-ice or to make a cut-off behind the hills, when the girl gave a sudden exclamation.

"What is it ?" he asked sharply.

Mollie pointed across the river. From the fringe of woods some little distance ahead the form of a man had emerged and was standing looking up the river. As Clancy saw him he turned in towards the bank, and before the man looked they had found the shelter of the scrub on the shore. Crouching low, and whispering to the girl to keep well out of sight, the corporal watched

the man who had so unexpectedly appeared. The man remained where he was without moving, as though watching or waiting for some one, and then from down-river came a sudden cry, and as the watcher on the opposite bank swung round, Clancy also turned. Lower down there was a dog-team on the ice with four men walking beside it. They were marching up-river, and as the man whom they had first seen began to move forward to meet them, Clancy pursed his lips as if to whistle.

No sound, however, came from his lips, for at that very moment one of the four men, attracted by something, moved from the side of the sled towards the other side of the river, and a minute later gave a weird call which halted his companions in their tracks. Again the man called, and turning the sled-team the other three men began to move towards him.

"Ah!" whispered Clancy, "they have found our trail. Come along, Miss Elkington. We've got to take risks now or be caught. Those fellows are Kogmollocks."

He gave one glance at the men now bunched together on the trail which he and his companion had left in the snow, marked the fact that the other man was now hurrying with his back towards the girl and himself, and then very cautiously began to drag the sled through the bush.

"Keep a bright look out, Miss Elkington," he whispered, "and tell me if they discover us."

The girl watched until an undulation in the ground hid the Kogmollocks from sight, then she joined in the task of hauling the sled. The bush thinned rapidly and soon they reached the edge of the open barren in which Clancy had looked in the morning. The gloom of the Arctic dusk now hid its snow-covered reach. The hint of snow had become a thin rain of icy particles

which further shrouded the barren from view. For a brief instant the corporal considered. He knew the risk of being overtaken in the open by an Arctic storm, but with the dusk closing round and with the coming of snow to hide the trail, it would not be necessary to venture far into the barren. Any moment the Kogmollocks might appear, and if he and the girl swung back towards the river it was almost certain that they would march into the arms of their pursuers. There were risks either way, and he decided for the one that was not immediate, hoping to escape in the dusk and behind the veil of the snow.

Striking an oblique course towards the distant woods which he had observed in his survey of the barren earlier in the day, he thrust forward into the open, pushing on at the fastest pace the girl could maintain until the scrub and the low-lying hills were out of sight.

"Now, we will go steadily, Miss Elkington. These fellows having found our trail are almost sure to follow immediately if they suspect how near we are. But the snow may keep them back. That I think is our only hope of escape ; and we are taking heavy chances in venturing into the barren. If it comes on to blow, the open barren will become a mere whirling inferno."

"I understand," said the girl. "We will go forward."

On their new course the wind caught them on the side, bringing with it the icy rain and tending inevitably to deflect the line of their march, and the corporal, weatherwise though he was, only made the discovery that such was the case when almost in front of them loomed the line of hills that he thought they had left behind them. He corrected the error, and with the friendly darkness steadily increasing, once more faced the open.

This time they had proceeded but a little way, when in the wind he caught faintly the yelp of dogs.

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"You heard that?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mollie Elkington. "There are dogs in front of us."

The corporal stopped and stared intently into the snowy darkness. The range of vision extended but a few yards and that the increasing snow steadily narrowed. He could see nothing, nor could his companion.

"Those Kogmollocks have discovered we have made the plunge into the barren; and have decided to cut us off and drive us back to the river."

"But we may creep past them in the snow and darkness," said the girl.

"Yes. It's a pretty desperate chance, though. They'll march in extended order like a ranging wolf-pack, and if one discovers us he'll give the call. But it is no use to stand still, we will go forward. Use your eyes and ears, Miss Elkington, and see if you see or hear anything in the least suspicious, tell me at once."

They moved forward anew. The wind blew steadily, and the rain of snow grew heavier. Both of them bent their heads to it, and at what seemed no more than a snail's pace they progressed through the waste.

Suddenly the girl gave a whisper.

"The dogs!" she said. "I heard them again. Over there this time." As she spoke she pointed to the left, and Clancy nodded. "Yes," he said, "I heard them also. That was the direction." He stopped abruptly. "There—once more! By Jove, they're coming this way."

Halting again, they stood listening. Once more the sharp yelp of dogs under the lash came in the wind; and he gripped the girl's arm.

"Crouch low, Miss Elkington. The snow on your parka will blend with the rest. We may escape unseen."

He himself crouched low by the sled at her side,

fumbling to withdraw his rifle from the lashings, where the snow had drifted about it. Releasing it, he stripped it of its protecting covering ; and then with his mitten ready for slipping off, he waited, staring into the dimness. For some three minutes they crouched thus, tensely awaiting developments, the girl's heart beating almost painfully, when out of the vast void that surrounded the brief range of vision broke a man and a dog team, the man toiling desperately ahead. Like shadows the man and the dogs slid past, and as they passed out of sight, in the dimness and snow-rack, the girl breathed more easily and touched the corporal's arm.

"What luck ! " she whispered. "What great good luck ! "

But scarcely had the words passed her lips, when from beyond the circle of vision, borne to them in the wind, came a sharp peal of mad laughter, that was answered by another equally mad. Clancy's blood chilled as he heard the two bursts of wild laughter ; and looking at the girl he saw her eyes were wide with horror.

"That man was not a Kogmollock," he said.

"There were two," answered the girl. "I am sure of that. The laughter was different and it was the laughter of men gone mad."

"Yes," agreed Clancy, staring into the opaqueness where the sled-team and driver had disappeared. "One of them must have been on the sled."

"On the sled ! " For one moment a wild thought flashed into the girl's mind as she stared into the gloom. "Do you think——" she began in a whisper that was lost in the wind ; and then checked as Clancy spoke aloud brusquely.

"It is no good lingering here ; and no use trying to follow in this mirk. We can do nothing ! That team will travel three yards to our one."

Whatever other thoughts may have been behind the words he did not express them, but facing the unbroken trail bent himself to the traces ; and the girl followed him, oppressed by vague fears and a foreboding sense of horror that was in no wise to be shaken off.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FATEFUL RESOLVE

UNUTTERABLY weary, at an early hour in the night they crossed an undulation and descended unexpectedly into a patch of dwarf spruce half buried in the snow. The wind was increasing and the snow driving cuttingly, and feeling that now they were safe from pursuit Clancy decided to camp. It was with difficulty he found materials for a small fire, and when he had it going, he looked round to find that Mollie Elkington, standing upright against the sled, had fallen asleep. To waken her he was forced to shake her, and as she stared at him drowsily he shouted to make himself heard above the wind whistling in the spruce.

"Miss Elkington, this won't do. You must keep awake a little longer. Better move about to keep your feet from freezing."

Stumbling with fatigue, the girl obeyed him, walking to and fro, and staggering at times like one drunk. Keeping a watchful eye on her, Clancy strove to wrest what little comfort was possible from the desperate conditions ; banking the snow with a snow-shoe to form a wind-screen, and stretching a blanket to throw down the little heat that the small fire afforded. First he made tea and compelled the girl to drink a mug of it steaming hot. It revived her wonderfully, so much so that she was able to assist him a little in the tasks to be done ; but as he noticed there was a strained,

anxious look upon her face. When the meal was ready, she was quite indifferent to the food.

"Miss Elkington," he said urgently, "you must eat, even if you have no inclination. Up here the body requires sustenance more than anywhere else on earth. I know that the dish is not very appetising——"

"It is not that," she interrupted quickly.

"Then what——"

"I am thinking of that team that passed us in the snow——" She broke off and gave a little shiver. "There were two men," she continued, "and one of them must have been on the sled. When my father was carried from the camp at the lake-side, he——"

"But there were three men then," interjected the corporal. "Your father, Dubosc and Anton!"

"Yes, I know, but who were those men? For three weeks until we encountered you we had seen no one but an occasional Indian with his family."

"I don't know who they can have been," answered the corporal slowly, his face like a mask. "But you are assuming a great deal in thinking that one of them may have been your father. It is much more like that the man whom we saw was some trapper, whose mind has given way in the solitude. I have known several cases of that kind; and once I took such a man—he was a prospector—three hundred miles to the post that he might be passed on to a sanatorium."

"Yes; but the second person whom we heard—the one who must have been riding——"

"His Indian or half-breed wife," suggested Clancy promptly. "Miss Elkington, don't worry with shadows. There are sufficient realities to trouble us without conjuring up imaginary ills. Eat this food, and after a sleep you will not put so gloomy an interpretation on a strange meeting. Remember that in the morning we must take the trail again, and if you distress your-

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self and lose sleep, inevitably it will mean weariness before we have covered the distance of the day's march. You simply must eat."

Mollie Elkington smiled a little wanly at his insistence upon what he clearly considered a vital thing, but with an effort that won his approval, she managed to eat what he had set before her; then, still following his desire, she lay down and, in a briefer time than seemed possible to Clancy, she drifted into sleep.

For quite a long time the corporal himself did not attempt to sleep. Seated by the fire, the fine snow driving down upon him, he gave himself to thought. A perplexed, perturbed look came on his face as he stared into the fire. The girl's suggestion had troubled him much more than he had owned. It was in every way possible that the man upon the sled had been her father, but in that case what had happened to the third man of the party? And was the madman who walked ahead of the dogs, packing the trail, Dubosc or Anton? He could not tell; but as the various possibilities marched through his mind, and as he watched the snow driving across the circle of firelight, he also began to share the anxiety that he had tried to banish from the girl's heart. If the man upon the sled was Mollie Elkington's father, then there was every need to deliver him out of the afflictions into which he had fallen, and it was imperative that they should follow him.

But he did not know, perhaps would never know, the truth about that team which had raced by whilst he and the girl had watched with so much apprehension in their hearts. He began to be beset with dark thoughts. Anton and Dubosc had left the camp by the lake-side together. They had been confederates, and it was unlikely that they could become anything else, linked as they were together in crime. Unless some accident had befallen, it was unthinkable

that one of them had perished whilst Mr. Elkington had survived ; since they were inured to the North from childhood, whilst the American was a tenderfoot of older years than either of his captors. And if any one had been sacrificed to the exigencies of the flight from the Kogmollocks, it was more likely to be Elkington than one of the half-breeds. There were, as he told himself, other possibilities. Mr. Elkington, finding himself a prisoner and concerned for the fate of his daughter, might have exchanged the secret of the gold for his liberty, and have essayed to return to the camp where his daughter had been left ; or, again, the two half-breeds, proceeding to brutal extremes, might have forced the secret from him, and then have left him to die in the woods. In either case there was little hope that ever he would be found alive ; and as Clancy thought of the situation, and of what sooner or later he would have to tell the girl, his face took a careworn look. Momentarily his thoughts swung back through the years, and he thought of his own father in some situation not unakin to this one of Mr. Elkington's, betrayed for the same gold, murdered by some one for the same secret of treasure. In the last two days he had ceased to think of the American as the man responsible for his father's disappearance, and sitting there by the fire he was able to connect the two in his mind without the vengeful feeling that he had experienced when Dubosc had told him his plausible story on the lower lake. It was true that he had no direct evidence of the falsity of the half-breed's story, nothing beyond a girl's word that her father was not guilty of his father's death or disappearance ; but notwithstanding the strength of hostile appearance, he trusted the girl and now accepted her word without reservation.

He did not trouble to analyse the cause of the

change within himself. He knew that he loved the girl who had faced a desperate situation with courage and nothing else did he care for. A few hours before he had come near to declaring his love ; and only a remembrance that it might seem that he was taking advantage of an accidental situation had deterred him from doing so. Now, as he looked at the girl lying there with the snow drifting round her, he resolved to himself that nothing should come between them.

"Nothing !" he whispered fervently. "Nothing !"

That word included even his father ; for, as he told himself, the girl must have been a child at school when his father, returning from his great find, walked off the map and out of all knowledge of his friends ; and even if, after all, her father had somehow been involved in that disappearance, the girl that she had been at the time must have been wholly innocent.

So musing, he looked at the girl's recumbent form again and a tender light came in his eyes. Whatever happened he must get her to safety ; and that, as he knew, would be no light task. For two of them, journeying at the only pace that was possible through wintry weather, the food supply was terribly limited ; and unless they met with game, only a rigid economy would suffice to pull them through.

His thoughts reverted again to the dog-team that had slipped past in the snowy darkness, and again there rang in his ears the maniac laughter. He shuddered a little at the remembrance ; and then visioned the tragic horror of a pair of madmen careering through the snowy waste of a great barren. Maniacs, as he had told the girl, were far from uncommon in the North. Utter solitude and the terrible silence of the waste, combined with weeks of darkness when the sun never once climbed above the horizon, had a terribly depressing effect on the mind ; and imagina-

tive men not infrequently passed the border line of lunacy under the strain. One case, as he had told the girl, he himself had handled, and there were many others—even among his own comrades.

Sitting there, he remembered the case of a trooper at Fullerton, whose companion had perished in the snow, and who in the awful silence heard his dead comrade calling to him continually, day and night, night and day, until at last, wearied by that ceaseless call, and of that intangible presence outside had barred himself in the post, and shot himself, having left a pitiful record of his sufferings. Then there was the case of the man at Fort Chipewyan, who had been detailed to take down to Fort Saskatchewan a Presbyterian missionary who, living in a hut with a half-breed at the H.B.C. depot at Peace Station, had become a raving maniac. The trail was all five hundred miles and the season was winter, with the temperature ranging from twenty to fifty degrees below zero. The constable, with many adventures by the way, had completed his journey, and had safely delivered the mad missionary to the care of the medical authorities. But returning, after the terrific strain he had endured, the solitude and the silence of the long trail had proved too much for him, and at Lac La Bitche he had broken down and had become violently insane. Then there was the case of the two men up at Herschel—

Clancy checked himself sharply. It was not good to recall instances of that sort, when one's self was confronted with a rather desperate situation; for the thought of madness may breed madness. But he could not prevent his mind following that team with its mad driver, plunging with apparent recklessness through the falling snow into the great barren. Who was that driver, and who was the man who had been

on the sled ? for that there was one he was convinced. To the similar question of the girl he had offered an answer, which he himself did not believe. Her thought, that the man on the sled might prove to be her father, had become his own. There was every likelihood of it——”

Again he broke off. He was following the circle of his own thought, which could avail nothing ; and it was very necessary that he should sleep and so refresh himself for the task before him. Before doing so, however, he stood upright, and walking to the bound of the camp stared out into the night. The blistering wind still blew across the barren bringing with it the shot-like snow ; and as he thought of the madmen trailing in it, he gave a little shiver.

“ God help the poor beggars ! ” he muttered. “ If they haven’t camped, it’s a certainty they’ll freeze ! ”

Returning to the fire, he heaped fresh sticks upon it, and then lay down for the night. It was long before he could altogether banish the thoughts that had disturbed him ; and again and again he visioned the lunatic driver passing like a shadow breaking trail through the snow and darkness with another madman on the sled behind him. After a time, however, the vision grew less sharply limned, the sharp edge of his thoughts blurred, the thoughts themselves grew muddled, and he slid into the sound healthy slumber, of the man whose life is largely spent in the sun and under the open stars.

He awoke quite late the following morning. The snow had ceased and the greyneess of dawn was spreading across the barren. Shaking off the snow, he stood up and stretched himself, and then looked at his companion. Apparently she still slept, and the snow was so piled about her that only the outline of her form was visible. Deciding that he would not awaken

her until breakfast was ready, he built up the fire with tops of dead dwarf spruce and set the kettle going ; then he moved out of the camp to a place where rising ground offered a look-out place. Reaching the highest point, he stared round. The field of his vision was limited to a mile or so on every side ; but as he stood there and the grey light broadened to day, it widened, and after a little time, lifting themselves against the leaden sky, far away he caught sight of the twin peaks which he had been making for the day before. The small hills before the river were not visible from his vantage point, neither was the river itself, owing to the rise of the ground between ; but the distant peaks helped him to discover his position without much trouble.

Reconnoitring carefully, it became clear to him that they must have penetrated farther into the barren than he had thought ; for, as far as he could see, it undulated on every side of him, unbroken by any timber, its wide surface undisturbed by any moving thing. With the remembrance of the dog-team of the previous night in his mind, he examined the white expanse carefully, minutely, his eyes moving from undulation to undulation, but without finding any indication of human presences. Still he continued to stare. There were undulations that would easily hide a dog-team from view, and at any moment the party for which he searched might debouch into the open, making a clear mark on the white expanse. But though he continued to stare for some time, turning to the four points of the compass, he saw nothing ; and he was just about to return to the camp, when his eye alighted on some object sticking up in the snow around which a little windrow had formed. He stared at it for a little time, wondering what it was ; then, moved solely by curiosity, he

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crossed to the place, and, kicking the snow away, pulled the object free.

As he did so, an expression of surprise broke from him, and an astonished look came on his face, for the thing he held was a rifle carefully buckled in its protective covering. For a moment amazement held him, then its significance broke upon him.

"Must have been dropped by those madmen, when——" His thought, spoken aloud, was checked abruptly, as a new one occurred to him.

"But it was a long way from here where they passed us!"

With the rifle under his arm he began to move about, his eyes fixed on the snow, and after a little time he found what he sought, a sled trail but faintly marked, by reason of the loose granular snow which had drifted into it. As he came upon it, he whistled thoughtfully to himself; and then began to follow it. Faint as was the outline to his trained eye, the task presented little difficulty; and after assuring himself that the trail led northward into the very heart of the barren, he stood staring in that direction for quite a long time, without seeing anything of note; then, carrying the rifle, he returned to the camp.

Mollie Elkington was awake and moving about the camp, and when he approached she gave him a cheerful "Good morning," then her eyes fell on the thing he was carrying.

"What have you there?" she asked quickly.

"A rifle!" he answered. "I found it out there in the snow. Some one trailing across the barren must have lost it."

The girl took a quick step forward; looked keenly at the soft protective covering, then a little cry broke from her.

"What is it?" asked Clancy quickly.

"That covering! It is my father's, I am sure."

"Your father's?"

"I am certain. Give me the rifle!" cried the girl.

"We can make absolutely certain. All my father's weapons are marked with his initials. It will be impossible to mistake one of them."

Whilst she was still speaking, she took the rifle from Clancy's hands, and began to slip off the covering. In a trice she slipped the weapon free, looked at the stock and then gave a cry.

"Is it——" began the corporal.

"Yes! Yes! There are the initials."

She indicated the stock where inlaid in narrow silver was a monogram made up of the initial letters of Elkington's name.

Clancy looked at it dumbfounded. There was now no doubt in his mind that the dog-team they had seen on the previous night was the one which the half-breeds had stolen from the Kogmollocks. And as he stood there in a flash he wondered who had accompanied it. The question was still in his mind when the girl spoke again, her voice quivering.

"Oh! I knew, I knew! Last night I knew!" She looked wildly round. "We must follow him! We must find him!"

Clancy himself looked round before he spoke, marked the empty world with all its bleakness, and then visioned that faint trail across the snow-covered wastes.

"It will be difficult," he began.

"Difficult!" cried the girl. "You will not let that stand in your way?"

"No," he replied shortly. "But it will be dangerous as well—very dangerous. Do not misunderstand me," he continued quickly, as he saw she was about to

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“speak. “I am not thinking of myself at all. I am thinking of you!”

“Oh,” cried the girl, “I can face any risks that you can face—for my father.”

“I do not doubt your spirit for a moment,” he answered quietly. “I am quite convinced of your courage and your willingness. But you do not know what the risks are.”

“Then tell me—that I may know, and that we may take the trail quickly.”

Clancy smiled a little at her impatience, then he nodded towards the great waste. “A barren like that is forlorn even in summer, in winter it is the desolation of death. There are three creatures of any size that venture to make it their home in winter—the caribou, the musk-ox and the wolves. I do not know this particular barren; but it seems to be of considerable extent; and travelling as we do hauling our sled, we may not even have sufficient food to cross it.”

“But we are not to cross it,” cried Mollie protestingly.”

“No! We are to follow a madman’s trail which may meander like a blind river. It may take us days to come up with that team, weeks maybe, and if there are storms, as almost certainly there will be at this season, we shall be held up for days at a time. We may be frozen; we shall have to travel on short rations until we meet game again; and if we don’t meet it, we may starve!”

“And these are the risks?”

“Some of them—there are others—as the wolves—all risks of death—but these are the main ones, exhaustion, cold, starvation—now will you go?”

“Yes!” cried the girl. “Yes! since I go with you to save my father. I am not afraid.”

For one moment their eyes met, and each looked into the other's soul, and the resolve that the man had made was shaken. This moment was his. To speak now was to be very sure of response. But though shaken the resolve was kept. He stood silent whilst a man might count ten, his eyes glowing as they looked into hers ; then he said abruptly, " I thought you would. We will start after breakfast."

And with that he turned and busied himself about the fire.

CHAPTER XIX

A MADMAN'S FEARS

AN hour later, standing at the point where he had found the rifle, Clancy pointed out to the girl the trail that he had found. It was faintly yet clearly defined, in spite of the snow that the wind had swept over it, as if seeking its obliteration.

"It goes there," he said, with a wave of his mittened hand northward, "straight into the heart of the Barren Land. But I do not think the driver of the team has any definite destination in his mind ; and it is possible that he will swing round and march back on his trail. There's no telling. In that case we may meet him." For just the fraction of a second he paused, and then added gravely, "The sooner the better."

Mollie Elkington understood quite well the significance of the last words. That they might be starting along the frozen road to death was clear to her ; but she made no remark. At all costs she must learn the truth about her father ; and if Clancy's unspoken love for her set the same compulsion upon him, at that moment she was in the mood to accept the sacri-

fice. Without another word they moved forward into the white expanse. There was no wind now, and the land was deathly silent—broken only by the creaking of their snowshoes and the crunching of the sled. It was beyond anything that the girl had ever known, or dreamed of, and it begot a tension that was almost unendurable. As a jangle of sound long continued may fret the nerves until there is a disposition to shriek against it, so this terrific silence fretted them with precisely the same result. She was conscious of an impulse to cry aloud and shatter that vast stillness; but she bit her lips and when she did speak it was in a whisper.

"The trail? We have lost it."

"No," answered Clancy reassuringly. "Just here it is hidden; but you can feel the packed snow underneath. We shall know the difference if we step aside from it."

Two minutes later the trail reappeared, a disturbance of the snow, almost obliterated by surface snow that had been blown by the wind and caught in the hollows, a faint broad depression, perfectly clear to the corporal's experienced eyes.

Hour by hour they tramped on, sometimes losing the trail in the hollows, but always finding it again on the rising ground. There was little speech between them; and like a person hypnotized the girl marched on, automatically, with a dull feeling at her heart; a feeling that to this task she was condemned eternally.

No respite from the nerve-racking silence was granted them, particularly no break in the dreary monotony of the snowy expanse. Occasionally they lifted a patch of stunted willows covered with snow, and at one of them following the trail as it passed over the tops of them the girl heard a rending sound, but did not turn to see what had occasioned it. Once

a fox slunk from their path, and twice they saw ptarmigan, noticeable only by their eyes. No other sign of life did they encounter, and there was little to cheer them in the meeting.

To Mollie Elkington came a feeling that Clancy and herself were the only human beings left alive. Odd fancies occurred to her as she tramped on through the greyness of a daylight in which the sun never manifested itself. The age which science had foretold was here anticipated. The fires of the sun had grown cold; and the universal and eternal winter had fallen upon earth. She and Clancy were the last of earth's race moving on a forlorn quest that could only end in desolation and the happy release of death.

Was it worth while to keep on, to deny oneself, to toil in a quest that would end in vanity, as did all earth's quests? The man ahead, her yoke-fellow, loved her; and she loved him. She had seen the flame of love light his grey eyes, and hungered for the sight again; hungered, too, to hear that love uttered in burning words. Why not? A word from her, no! a look would suffice; and with the inimical forces of nature for ever threatening, with the moment waiting that would bring extinction and make them one with this dead world through which they moved, ought she to put from her the one passionate moment of joy that the world held? A tag of old verse leaped to her mind.

"Gather ye rosebuds while you may
Old time is still a-flying——"

Rosebuds! Her eyes swept the vast frozen expanse of the Barren Lands, and as the ironic contrast drove itself upon her, a little burst of laughter was forced from her. The laughter had a note of amazing eeriness in the strange silence, and she checked it instantly,

almost afraid of its alien quality. The man ahead stopped in his tracks like a man shot, and as he swung round she saw his startled face with fear and concern for her shining in his eyes.

"What——" he began in an unsteady voice.

"It is nothing," she answered, guessing the fear that he entertained. "It was just a thought of roses that came to me that so contrasted with this that I laughed."

Relief showed in his face and glowed in his eyes. He laughed himself as he replied. "You frightened me almost to death. I—I thought——"

"Yes," she said, "I understand. I won't offend again."

"Offend," he cried. "I am glad that you have the heart! The more you laugh the better."

"But I shall not laugh again," she answered quickly. "I should be afraid to do it again."

"I understand the feeling," he said, "I have been conscious of it many a time. It is the same in the gloom of the great woods."

They resumed their way, and presently the faint trail made a deviation, and then an abrupt turn to the left. Clancy viewed this turn with concern. So long as the trail kept on across the barren it had seemed to him that it must lead somewhere, but now he recalled his own words about following the meanderings of a madman, and knowing how limited was the food supply, he knew that the deviation added to the risks that already surrounded them. He said nothing, however, but in silence followed the trail that was leading he knew not whither.

Having started late, they did not halt for the mid-day meal. At any moment the wind might spring up and cover the faint trail completely. Knowing how imperative it was that they should come within sight

or sound of the quarry before this happened, they toiled on, until the short day was almost done, sustained by a thought that before long they would reach a place where the men ahead had camped ; perhaps surprise them still in camp. That hope, however, was doomed to disappointment, and with the coming of darkness they prepared to camp in a small thicket of dwarf trees whose tops lifted themselves through the snow.

To find wood that would burn was no easy task, but presently a small fire was crackling, and going to the sled Clancy began to unpack for the night. He was so engaged when a sudden exclamation from him took Mollie Elkington to his side.

"What is it ?" she asked quickly.

For answer, he pointed to the blanket which had been used as a cover-all for the sled and its load. The girl stared at it wonderingly, and then low down caught sight of a rip in the blanket, and looking more closely saw perhaps half a handful of beans lying in the snow just underneath the torn place. In a flash she understood, and watched with apprehension while he hurriedly completed the unloading. It did not take very long ; and within three minutes they knew that by a simple accident the grave risks that environed them had been suddenly trebled ; for the unopened sack of beans which Clancy, had brought from the dead trapper's cabin, lay flat-bellied and practically emptied of its contents, a jagged tear in the side, corresponding with that in the covering blanket, showing how the contents had been lost.

For a moment Clancy stared at the flat sack aghast ; then he stooped and examined the rent. When he stood up, there was a set look upon his face.

"I wonder how it happened ?" he said in a stony voice.

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Mollie Elkington remembered suddenly the rending sound that she had heard when passing through the patch of stunted willow.

"I know," she said in a whisper. "It was whilst we were passing through one of those clumps this morning. I heard a rending sound; but I thought nothing of it."

"This morning!" The corporal stared into the darkness in the direction from which they had come. "Then we've scattered the best part of our food supply over ten or twelve miles of snow."

"I didn't know!" cried the girl, in sudden contrition. "I never thought—I—I——"

"Of course you didn't, Miss Elkington. It's just the luck of the trail, though I've never known such an accident to happen before. Some sharp stick must have caught and ripped the side of the sack out." He stood for a moment, silent, hiding his real feeling of dismay; then he spoke lightly. "Anyway, it can't be helped. We shall have to make the best of it, I suppose."

He said no more for a moment; but busied himself in preparing supper, only now he halved the quantities that he put into the pot and boiled the mess longer. His manner was that of a man who had put care behind him; but Mollie Elkington knew very well that the thing that had overtaken them was equivalent to a disaster; and when after supper she saw him making a careful estimate of the food supply, she forced his confidence.

"The loss of those beans is very serious, is it not?"

"Yes," he answered quite simply.

"How serious? I want to know. Please be frank."

"Well," he replied, "it had diminished our staple supply by two-thirds, and it was none too much to start with. The moose-meat is almost done, and there

remain but a few pounds of beans and of flour, whilst we have tea and sugar in fair quantity. We shall have to find game now or overtake the sled in front in a very short time."

For a moment Mollie Elkington stood considering. In view of the changed aspect of things, had she any right to risk this man's life further for a problematical end? She decided that she had not, and she spoke her mind promptly.

"Then we must give up the search! It is not fair to ask you to imperil your life for my father in such circumstances."

"There is no need to give it up," answered Clancy as promptly. "Indeed, our safety may lie in continuing it. Your father had, I imagine, ample stores——"

"Yes, yes!"

"It is all the more desirable that we should continue the quest, for that very reason. To turn back will not in any way solve the food difficulty whilst to go forward may, and either way we have an equal chance of finding game."

"You are sincere in this, Mr. Clancy?"

"Quite sincere! The risks in going forward now are really rather less than in taking the backward trail, which may only lead us to the hands of the Kogmollocks, and apart from them to no food supply that we are aware of."

The girl nodded thoughtfully. "Yes," she replied. "That is so; but if we do not overtake the sled in front——"

"Then we shall have to live on the land," he answered as cheerfully as he could. "Keep our eyes lifting for the great caribou herd which roams the barrens, or for a musk-ox which would give us meat for the rest of the winter."

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"But all day we have seen no sign of either?"

"No, but to-morrow we may find both. The caribou is the most restless creature of the North—here to-day, and to-morrow fifty miles away. Any hour we may sight a herd, and if we do, with a little luck, the situation will be saved."

"Then I hope we have the luck," said the girl softly.

"So do I," answered the corporal a little grimly, and began to make preparations for the night.

About the same time, twenty-two miles farther up, and almost on the edge of the barren, where the poplar thickets thrust their way through the snow, a strange scene was being enacted. Jean Dubosc, a man whose nerves had gone all to pieces, stood regarding his prisoner who was fast asleep, wrapped carefully in blankets, his back against the sled. There was a light of madness in the half-breed's eyes, and his face had a ravaged look. Then from his lips there broke an impatient cry.

"Wake up, Ah tell you, Elkington. Dey are here, dey watch zee silent ones, oh! so still. Dey wait to spring forth upon us."

The man whom he addressed opened his eyes. For the first time since that blow on the head, which had sent him first into unconsciousness and then into delirium, there was a dawning light of reason in them. As he looked at the half-breed bending over him, almost wolfish of aspect, the eyes grew more alert; and then Dubosc spoke again.

"Speak! M'sieu Elkington, speak!"

"With an effort, Elkington's lips shaped themselves to wondering words. "What is it?"

"Dey watch us!" whispered the half-breed. "Dey are dere in zee darkness."

"Who?" asked the other, his mind still struggling with an uncomprehended situation.

The half-breed's only reply was a glance round in the darkness behind him; then he moved quickly, altering his position, and bringing his ravaged face into the full glare of the firelight. The white man watched him wonderingly, and then stared intently into the darkness without, however, seeing anything. He glanced round the camp, a troubled look coming on his face as he did so. After a moment he asked sharply, "Where is my daughter, Dubosc? Where are Montana and Anton?"

The latter question only penetrated to Dubosc's reeling brain. "S-s-s-h-h, M'sieu, or Anton he hear you!"

"But where is he?" asked Elkington in a whisper.

"Out dere in zee darkness! He watch all zee time. Ah keel heem; but he follow all zee same. But he veel not have zee gold. Non! non! for dat ees mine; mine, m'sieu."

A laugh of maniacal triumph broke from the half-breed's lips; and with a sudden shiver, the other, looking into the wolfish face and glittering eyes, realized that he had to deal with a madman. With that knowledge came a tumultuous surge of anxiety, less for himself than for his daughter.

"Where is Miss Elkington, Dubosc?" he asked sharply.

This time the half-breed answered. "Ah not know. She ees lef' at zee camp with Montana, an' Montana he have a hole blown in heem!"

Like a flood remembrance came to Mr. Elkington. The Kogmollocks! They had been attacking the camp when darkness had overtaken him; and now — He looked hastily around. The tents were not visible; nor was Montana or Anton; only Jean Dubosc

in a crouching attitude, staring fearfully over his shoulder. The expression on the man's face chilled Mr. Elkington's blood; for it was clear that the other was visioning formless things that made his soul stark with pure terror. Then swiftly a terrible anxiety for his daughter awoke in Mr. Elkington's mind. That some untoward thing had happened he was sure—but what? Where was she? Dubosc was undoubtedly insane, the look on his face showed that. Was he speaking the truth, or only the delirious fancies of a disordered mind?

Another look round the camp convinced him that there was some measure of truth in the half-breed's story, for they were utterly alone. His anxiety mounted at express speed. He started to rise and then made the discovery that he was cunningly bound to the sled. He struggled hard to release himself, and so attracted Dubosc's attention.

"Non! non, M'sieu!" cried the half-breed sharply, reaching for his rifle. "You weel sit still or——"

He thrust the weapon forward, and as he caught the maniacal glare in the other's eyes Elkington subsided. At the moment there was nothing to be gained by struggling, and in addition he became suddenly aware of an unaccountable weakness in himself. His head was reeling, there was a blur before his eyes, and he had a feeling of nausea. It took him some minutes to recover from the effects produced by his strenuous effort; but when his head cleared and he was able to see plainly he looked at the half-breed.

Dubosc was again in the crouching attitude with his rifle held ready for action as if expecting the advent of an enemy. He was staring fixedly into the darkness, and the look on his face made Elkington

shiver again. For a little time he observed him without speaking and saw the man creep silently round the fire, his face turned over his shoulder as if he really were watching something in the darkness behind him. Elkington himself stared into the dimness beyond the circle of the firelight, but could see nothing whatever ; and he had an eerie feeling as he saw Dubosc settle himself exactly opposite the place where he had previously crouched. But scarcely had he settled himself when the process began over again. First he stirred uneasily, like a wild animal conscious of human observation ; then he looked fearfully over his shoulder ; and finally once more began to creep round the fire, silently, as if afraid of attracting attention, seating himself at last in the place that he had left but a few minutes before.

The white man was appalled. The man, whose prisoner he was, was mad ; every restless glance of his eyes backward revealed it ; every furtive move round the fire confirmed the fact. And as he thought of the possible fate of his daughter he groaned aloud. The necessity for delivering himself that he might go to her help suddenly became imperative ; since if there was any truth in the madman's story she was now in the hands of the Kogmollocks. Cautiously he slipped his hands from his mittens, and began to feel the hide rope that bound him to the sled. He made practically no sound as he did so ; but all the same the half-breed turned sharply.

" Non ! M'sieur. You not do dat ! "

For a moment the look in Dubosc's face was quite sane, his peremptory tone that of a normal man guarding something that he treasured. His prisoner jumped at the opportunity of acquiring information.

" Dubosc," he said. " Where is my daughter ? "

" Ah not know," replied the half-breed quite sanely.

"Anton an me leave her in zee tent when we run. We want you, m'sieu ; an' dere is no time to bring away zee girl, so we leave her to zee Kogmollocks peoples."

Mr. Elkington compared this with the man's previous assertion and decided that he was telling the simple facts ; then he put another question.

"What are you going to do with me ? "

"Ah breeng you along, dat you may lead me to zee gold, m'sieu. You hav' been sick in zee head ; an' Ah fear you weel die. But Ah care for you, Ah mak' you eat when you not know dat you eat at all ; an' I hav' save you, because you hav' zee knowledge of dat gold, where you weel tak' me when Anton hav' cease to follow me."

As he spoke the other half-breed's name, the mad look leaped in his face once more ; and his attitude changed as he swung a swift glance over his shoulder. Then again he began his furtive circling of the fire, but this time seemed unable to escape whatever he feared in his mad mind. Not for so long as half a minute was he able to settle, and quite suddenly he let loose a startling yell. A second later he was kicking the dogs from their sleeping-places, and when the beasts snarled and shrunk back, he gripped them by their collars, and literally flung them into the traces. The white man half expected to see him torn in pieces ; but the beasts cringed before him in a fear that was almost abject. When the brutes were harnessed, Dubosc ran to his captive, deftly untwisted a couple of turns of hide rope ; and just as Elkington began to struggle swung him with a giant's strength upon the loaded sled, half-choked him with one hand whilst with the other he dragged a couple of blankets over him. The white man was still gasping, when the lunatic dragged tight the rope that bound him to the

sled ; and two seconds later a mad yell mingling with the sharp yelp of whipped dogs sounded in his ears ; and at the same instant he felt the sled jerk forward and begin to move through the darkness.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE FACE OF DEATH !

IT was towards the evening of the eighth day following the discovery of the loss of the beans, when Clancy and Mollie Elkington, looking ahead, caught a gleam that could only be made by a fire. As they saw it, both of them instinctively halted.

"At last," said Clancy in a shaking voice.

"Yes ! At last. Thank God !" responded the girl.

They no longer dragged the sled with them. Five days earlier it had been left behind as a useless encumbrance, and such things as they needed and their fast-dwindling store of food was in the pack on the corporal's shoulders. The short rations on which they had marched for over a week were telling on both ; but most on the corporal, whose face was gaunt, with the skin cracked and blackened by the frost. With dwindling vitality each day they had taken the trail with increasing hope ; no longer following the faint trail on which they had started, but instead a deepening track that almost every hour grew more clearly defined, no snow having fallen, and the air being still, no surface snow having drifted to hide it. Twice they had found extinguished fires that were still warm, and now ahead of them glowed a live fire, that could only be the camp fire of the men whom they were following.

Clancy considered it for a moment before he spoke again.

"We will go a little nearer ; then I will reconnoitre."

They walked forward for perhaps a quarter of an hour, then the corporal halted and with hands that shook with excitement and weakness he began to unfasten the knots that held the pack in place. Dropping it in the snow, he whispered a caution to the girl.

"Don't move towards the camp unless you hear me shout, Miss Elkington."

"Very well," she answered briefly, not pleased at the thought of playing an inactive part.

"I will approach from the farther side ; so don't be alarmed if it is some little time before I call you."

She nodded her understanding, and he moved away from her, soon becoming a mere shadow in the ghostly dusk. It was too cold to stand still for long without freezing, and Mollie Elkington began to walk to and fro, following a line at right angles to the trail in order that she might keep the fire ahead in sight. She was quivering with excitement and anticipation. In a little time she would know if her father was alive ; or at any rate she would learn what had happened to him. This, too, was the end of the long trail through the snow ; and afterwards with the dogs and the sled and the food that would be available, journeying forward would be almost a holiday jaunt compared with the bitter trail of hunger and increasing weakness which she and Clancy had followed.

The thought of the dogs, however, awakened fears for the corporal. At this hour, when the camp would be newly made, and the huskies alert for food, that Clancy could escape being discovered by them seemed impossible. Anxiously she listened for the first yelp that would proclaim the dogs' discovery of the corporal ; but the yelp did not sound. She stood still for a moment or two to listen. The immense silence

remained unbroken ; and she resumed her pacing, listening all the time, her eyes straining through the dimness towards the ruddy glow of the fire.

The minutes passed with halting feet. No sound reached her and nothing happened. She began to be afraid for Clancy. What if some mishap had befallen him ? What if Dubosc or Anton, whichever of them was with the sled, had observed his coming and had arranged some trap into which he had fallen ? Her fear mounted at the thought ; and impulsively she began to move in the direction of the fire. Then she checked herself.

" No, I promised," she whispered, " and I will keep the bond."

She returned to her place by the pack ; and had just recommenced her march to and fro, when across the snow she heard his voice.

" Ahoy, Miss Elkington ! "

" Oh, thank God ! thank God ! " she whispered in the intenseness of her relief ; and then lifting the pack, placed it on her shoulders.

" Coming ! " she cried exultantly and began to move towards the fire.

Just as she moved into the circle of light, she became aware of the corporal, standing quite alone by the fire, and as she saw him had a miserable premonition of what was to follow.

" Where are they ? Where is my father ? " she demanded quickly.

" Gone ! I should say."

" Gone ! " The girl's accent was eloquent of consternation.

" Yes ! Or it would appear so. This fire has not been replenished lately. These men are just one camp ahead of us ; and we have still to overtake them."

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"Oh!" said the girl, with a sudden quiver in her voice, "and I had so hoped——"

"So had I," broke in Clancy. "But there's no help for it. That is most certainly the case; and we've got to keep right on or give up the chase."

"I wouldn't give up now," cried the girl passionately, "not if I knew the pursuit was to last until the crack of doom. We must come up with these men! We must find out what has happened? And we will! We will!"

"At any rate we will try," agreed Clancy.

"Let us push on now. The sled cannot be far in front of us. Perhaps we can yet overtake it."

"No," answered Clancy with decision. "We couldn't make another three miles without dropping in our tracks. We must camp and rest, and here is a fire waiting us."

"But, but——"

"It is no use, Miss Elkington. Knocked up as we are, we can't possibly overtake a dog-sled; nor alternatively could we make the distance between two camps. The only way we can do the thing at all is by conserving our strength; and never overtaxing ourselves. We will camp and eat; then I will explain an idea that has been in my mind all day, and which this fire supports."

Without more ado, he began to search for fresh fuel, the girl helping him. To an observer it must have been clear that both of them were feeling the full effects of a Northland trail followed on a diminishing dietary. They moved listlessly without any spring in the muscles; and once or twice the man stumbled in his walk, whilst once after using the axe he pressed his hands to his breast as if to check the pounding of his heart.

They built up the fire, made tea which revived

them, then out of the little flour that remained the corporal made a kind of porridge, sweetening it with sugar ; and this was their only dish. For Clancy's big frame the amount he allotted himself was terribly inadequate, and stimulated rather than stayed his appetite ; but it had to suffice, for there was the morrow to think of, and the day after that ; and he knew now that the situation was desperate, though he said nothing to the girl.

After eating, for a time they sat silent, basking in front of the fire, then Mollie broke the silence.

" You said you had an idea ? "

" Yes," he answered, " I have. Indeed, it is more than an idea, it is an absolute conviction."

" What is it ? "

" Well, I am convinced that whoever is driving the sled, for some reason, is travelling in the night-time, and resting during the day."

Mollie Elkington looked at him in wonder as he made the statement ; then she asked : " That is very odd, isn't it ? "

" Very ! I can't pretend to understand it ! But I am sure that it is so. Twice we have found the remains of fires that were still warm ; and on those days, as you know, in each case we travelled late, arriving at the deserted camping places at least two hours after our usual time. The fact that we found those ashes warm was an indication that the fires had been alight at no very distant time. But no man breaking trail in the morning leaves so big a fire behind him that it will burn through the day, and be warm long after day is done. Therefore it is evident that the men whom we are following must have struck camp and taken the trail very late. It was because I had that thought that we started so very early this morning ; and the fact that we have found this fire

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still burning is evidence that my idea is the right one, and that our quarry is travelling in the night."

"But why?" asked the girl wonderingly.

"That I do not know, nor can I even guess, unless it has something to do with the madness we suspect."

"Perhaps they know that we are following them."

Clancy shook his head. "No. That is not in the least likely. In all the doublings and twistings of their mad trail never once have we had a glimpse of them since we started to follow it. And we have been looking for them, remember, and if ever for a moment they had been in sight we must have seen them. In such circumstances it is most unlikely that they can have become aware of us. As a matter of fact, I am quite sure that since that night when they drove madly past us, they have never been nearer to us than they are at this moment."

The girl looked at him quickly. "Then could we not follow, now," she cried eagerly. "We might overtake the sled——"

"No!" he interrupted. "We can never do it whilst they are on the run. The only time that we can possibly come up with them, if my idea is the correct one, is in the day-time, when they are in camp resting. And to do that we must make a very early start. The experience of to-day proves that. We were afoot earlier this morning and we have found this fire still alight; if we start at mid-night and keep steadily on, we may overtake them before they break camp to-morrow."

"I believe you are right," said the girl.

"I am convinced of it," answered Clancy. "So I think we must get to rest at once. A few hours will make a world of difference to us; and to-morrow
——"

"Yes! Please God!" said the girl, understanding his unspoken thought.

"Then we will turn in now, and prepare ourselves for a midnight start."

Both of them rolled themselves up warmly, and lay down in the heat of the fire. Half an hour passed and then Clancy raised his head and listened. A sound of quiet breathing reached him, and after waiting a little time, assured that the girl was asleep, he slipped out of his blankets and, moving quietly, went to the terribly depleted food pack, and began to busy himself over the contents.

At that precise moment the rabbit skin robe which covered Mollie Elkington was cautiously dragged away from her face, and her open eyes gleamed in the fire-light as they watched him with intense interest. It was quite easy to see what he was doing, since he sat in the full glare of the fire-light; and she followed his every action carefully. He was, as she saw, measuring the flour that remained in the enamelled mug. Five times whilst she watched she saw him fill and empty the vessel, then he looked up from his task, and his whisper of despair reached her.

"Seven, and a handful of beans and sugar! Tomorrow or the day after at the latest——"

The rest of the words were lost to her; but she had no difficulty in completing the thought. Tomorrow or the day after they must overtake the sled that they were pursuing, or find game, or as a third alternative die of starvation. She faced the alternatives unflinchingly. She knew these were the facts of the situation, and it was no use wilfully blinding herself to them.

"The sled," her thought ran. "We must overtake that somehow. The chance of game is but a chance."

It was indeed little more. In eight days they had

killed but once, and then only a ptarmigan which the corporal had shot with his rifle. Not once had they seen a sign of the great caribou herd which roams the Northern barrens, feeding on the mosses under the snow, a herd which as she knew might at that moment be either hundreds of miles away, or feeding over the next billowy rise in the land. It was no use depending upon the herd, which wanders more aimlessly than the wind, here to-day and gone before nightfall. They must concentrate on the pursuit, and not waste energy in ranging for game as on two or three days they had done. The sled must be overtaken, or they would perish of hunger and the bitter cold. Quite calmly Mollie Elkington thought over the situation and considered the desperate chances; then she resolutely put the thought of them from her, and after a little time drifted into sleep.

When some hours later Clancy awakened her, the Aurora was flashing overhead, flinging out its fantastic streamers and pennants in a prodigal display of coloured light that was yet without warmth, and whose faint rustling might have been that of silken garments shrouding the great austere spirit of the north.

Clancy was already busy at the fire, stirring the porridge which was their only food, and as she saw him she had an idea.

"Put more flour and sugar in," she said quietly.

He stared at her in surprise. "Why?" he asked. "We are very short of——"

"I know," she said. "I saw you measuring the flour when you thought I was asleep, and I know that to-morrow we shall be facing starvation if we do not succeed to-day. But you are weakening, and to-day we are to make a supreme effort. To do that we must have the energy that only food can give. It is no use,—what is the phrase?"—she broke off

and gave a little desperate quivering laugh—"It is no use spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar."

"You mean that we ought to bank on the chance of overtaking the sled to-day."

"Yes!" she answered boldly. "Don't you?"

"It's a gambler's throw," he said thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure that we ought to make it."

"Why not?" she demanded resolutely. "I have a feeling that we ought to challenge fate, and stake all in the effort to win. If failure awaits us this way, there cannot possibly be any hope of success on the other course. We may fend off absolute starvation a day or two longer—but no more, and weakened as we shall be, we cannot hope to succeed. I thought it all out last night when you thought I was sleeping, and I am convinced that this is the thing to do. If it is a gambler's throw, let us make it. The gods of chance may be kind to us."

Clancy's eyes lighted suddenly as he looked at her. "By the Mass, you have spirit, Miss Elkington! And we'll try it. But if the dice go against us and we fail——"

"The fault will be mine! You can blame me."

"Blame you!" he cried. "Never!"

He turned to the flour-bag again, measured more flour into the pot, added sugar, and then began to stir. The girl watched him with gratified eyes, glad to have got her way and sure that in his mind he agreed with her wholly.

When they had eaten a more substantial and satisfying meal than they had partaken of for days, once more they took the trail, with the aurora still crackling overhead. The food stimulated their waning energies, but better than even the food was the new hopefulness which quickened the spirit. Ahead of them, within the day's march was their quarry, and

before the next darkness had fallen they would have overtaken it, and vindicated the long quest.

Mollie Elkington, more than Clancy, was conscious of this uplift of spirit. She moved forward buoyantly, treading almost on the heels of Clancy's snow-shoes, and unconsciously quickening the pace he had set. At last he laughingly remonstrated.

"Steady, Miss Elkington! We've a long march to make, and we must not overrun the pace at this end, when we may need strength for a spurt at the tape."

With a laughing apology the girl fell back a little, and with extreme deliberation regulated her pace to his. She knew, of course, that he was absolutely right; and that if they were to keep the trail hour after hour, mile after mile, the steady pace, that at no point put any extra strain upon them, would alone avail them. But for all that, her mind was hurrying ahead; and with every step she was anticipating what awaited them at the end of the trail. She was sure that she had been right in insisting on the extra ration. A gambler's throw it might be; the last desperate play of a man whose possessions are themselves of little use, but which staked may bring a fortune. Yet she had a hunch that the challenge to the iron fates of the North would be justified; and that feeling made her light-hearted, bringing the spring back to her walk.

Clancy's uplift, as hinted, was not quite so pronounced. The extra food helped him amazingly; but he did not allow himself any undue elation through an unjustified anticipation. Far better than his companion could, he knew the chances that might mock their throw, and instead of bringing fortune ensure disaster; but having taken the chances deliberately, he refused to look back, and, with face set, moved

forward resolutely, determined to deserve the success that fate might yet cruelly deny.

Hour by hour they kept the trail. The streamers of the aurora were withdrawn from the skies, the stars were lost in the blackness that preludes the dawn, then came the dawn itself, grey, forbidding, and, as they topped the undulation, bringing with it an icy wind.

As that wind smote his cheek, Clancy knew that the throw had gone against them, for with it drifting heavily overhead came greasy-looking clouds that meant snow before the day was out. With despair mounting in his heart, he set his teeth, and went grimly forward on the trail that half an hour's wind and snow would utterly obliterate. He noted dully that the character of the country was changing. On the other side of the undulation, well away, there were hills, and on the rolling land between trees lifted themselves, the outposts of the great woods hidden in the dimness beyond. The changing features of the landscape, however, did nothing to release his heart from the new despair that now gripped it. The trail at present was running out of the barrens to a less inhospitable land,—a land where at any rate the smaller creatures of the wild might serve to keep the flame of life burning in them, however dimly; but if snow came, the trail was lost to them for ever.

And the snow came. As they reached the first tree by which the trail passed, the wind whirled about them a cloud of icy particles, each one of which seemed knife-edged. It whirled and passed, leaving them white from head to foot, and breathing heavily, for the gust that brought the snow had been so severe as to make respiration difficult. Other gusts followed, yet like a man hypnotized, Clancy followed the now diminishing trail, and the girl followed with increas-

ing hopelessness. They passed other trees, the gusts shrieking in their tops. They met new scuds of snow and soon the landscape itself was hidden from their view, the wind lifted the snow about their feet, and whirled it upward in a blinding smother; but Clancy still followed the trail unyieldingly; though with despair tearing at his heart.

The snow no longer came in gusts, but became a hurtling hell of icy particles about them. The range of vision was perhaps a couple of yards; and with a sudden fear that he might lose the girl, Clancy stopped and caught her hand, then they moved on together. They passed trees that were like shadows. At some point they must have stepped aside from the trail, for when Clancy looked for it, it had utterly vanished. A thicket of poplars offered itself, as it seemed, rising suddenly out of the snow. It would afford some kind of shelter; and into it Clancy plunged, dragging the girl with him. In the very heart of it they came to a standstill; and for a moment remained speechless, gasping with their exertions.

The girl was the first to speak. Turning and standing quite close to him she said suddenly:

"We have lost?"

"Yes!" he said nodding. "Yes! The game has gone beyond redemption, I'm afraid. We haven't a counter left."

The girl still looked at him. In her eyes there was a light that was not one of despair. For a moment she seemed oblivious of the storm snapping the poplar boughs about them and howling over the wilderness beyond. Her face had a radiant look, which astonished him as he saw it; and then the soft gleam in her eyes told him.

"Girl!" he cried, and, as he held out his arms, added stammeringly: "My dear . . . my . . . dear!"

She went to his arms like a homing bird. "You love me?"

"Yes!" he cried. "These many days; and now . . . now . . ."

"Now that we are like to die, you tell me?"

"Yes! I would have done so before, but——"

"I know," she cried, "I know," and then she lifted her face for what not even the imminence of death should rob her of, and Clancy kissed her with the snow whirling about them in a blinding smother.

CHAPTER XXI

CARIBOU !

FOR a little while Clancy stood with the girl in his arms, whilst the snow drove about them, blindingly, threatening to become their winding-sheet. The great moment had come on the heels of the moment of despair, and it brought new hope to him. "My dear," he cried suddenly, "we will not give the game up—we will not die. We will live, for our love's sake. Help me, and we will yet make a fight for it."

Kissing her again, he released her, then he began to shovel the snow with his snow-shoe, piling it up in a semi-circular bank. Mollie Elkington seconded his efforts to the utmost of her powers; and with hearts that pounded with the effort, they piled up the snow steadily. Then when the snow bulwark was almost ready he left the place to hunt for fuel. He was gone so long that the girl grew afraid that he had been overcome by the storm, and, distressed beyond measure, left the bank and began to follow his trail. She had gone but a little way when she met him returning.

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"My dear," he cried, expostulating. "What are you doing?"

"You were so long," she explained. "I was afraid!"

Clancy understood, and though he made no reply, his eyes glowed with tenderness as he looked upon her. Returning to the bulwark of snow, the corporal crouched behind it, and under a stretched blanket tried to kindle a fire. In his pack he had brought with him dried bark and moss and small sticks from the last camping place; but in spite of these aids it was a good ten minutes before the first little plume of smoke and spurt of flame told him that he had succeeded, and by that time his right hand was freezing.

"Add sticks, my dear!" he said to the girl, as, catching up a handful of snow in his mittened hand, he began to scrub with a vigour that threatened other ills beside freezing. Very slowly the stings of returning circulation made themselves felt, and it was a good ten minutes before he dared slacken his efforts, and hold it to the now-increasing blaze of the fire. The girl looked at him anxiously; and he nodded reassuringly.

"The pangs of purgatory are in it! There's no real harm done."

Nevertheless whilst Mollie continued to feed the fire, he continued to hold it to the blaze, rubbing it steadily for some time, then when it was aglow he slipped it back into the mitten.

"Put the pot on, Mollie! We'll have tea."

Whilst the girl obeyed his instructions he piled the snow bank higher, gradually increasing it until it extended in a small circle round the camping-place. He worked on until the bank was half his own height, narrowing towards the top; then reeling with fatigue, he dropped on to the blanket which the girl had

spread in the lee of the snow, and rolling another round him to keep back the chill liable to follow perspiration, he lay there breathing heavily. His heart was thumping wildly ; hammers seemed to be pounding in his head, and there were black specks before his eyes, consequent on the violent endeavours made in his ill-nourished condition. He lay there until his heart grew steadier, and the hammering in his head became less violent ; then, just as the girl approached with the boiling tea, he lifted himself up a little.

" You first, my dear ! "

" No ! You need it more, Terence. "

At her shy use of his name for the first time he smiled.

" Terry is my pet name, " he said ; and, taking the mug, gulped down the scalding tea.

Mollie refilled the mug, and seated herself by his side, and whilst she sipped the hot liquid he threw a blanket round her, and when she had finished pulled the rabbit-skin covering round both of them, and sat there with her in his arms.

The snow drove over their improvised shelter in blinding sheets, but because of the inverted bowl shape of the shelter, comparatively little found its way in. They sat there for a little while, listening to the roar of the storm, the threshing and snapping of the poplars, and at the end the girl spoke.

" Terry, I am glad you love me ; even if we are to die. "

" We won't die, " he said resolutely. " We'll still sit in at the game on the credit of our love. "

" But if the storm lasts long ? "

" We have yet a little flour ; and there are some beans, not many, but enough to keep life in us for a day. There's the tea, too ? and at least two pounds of sugar. Lying here, and not exerting our-

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selves, we can last a week or more if we can keep the fire going."

"A week or more," she echoed thoughtfully, "and together."

"Together, sweetheart."

"And if we die?"

"Not even death shall part us. But we will not die! We must not think of it now. We must have the will to live; we must determine to do so. We can fight even hunger with our souls."

"Perhaps God will be kind to us," she whispered in his ear. "Perhaps He will let us live—because of our love."

"I pray that He may," said Clancy reverently; and then for a time silence fell between them.

So still did she lie in his arms that Clancy thought that she was sleeping, and glanced down at her face resting against his shoulder under the rabbit-skin wrap; her eyes opened, and met his own a-brim with love.

"I thought you were asleep," he said.

"No," she answered. "I was thinking how strange it is that when we are fronted by death we should have dared to speak of love."

"Because love is stronger than death," he replied. "Love is life; and it is death's defiance."

"Yes," she murmured thoughtfully. "Yes! In the moment when you kissed me, I forgot altogether that we had lost the game. Somehow I had a feeling of triumph, as of some great end reached."

"You mean a new game began, Mollie; the real great game of life in which you and I play partners."

"We have been that since you stole me from the Eskimo igloo," she whispered; "and now—now we play with death across the table."

"No!" he said almost violently. "No! And if we do we will beat him yet."

"With three mugs of flour, a handful of beans and two pounds of brown sugar!"

"No! With our love and our will to live. Don't think of defeat now, Mollie! When the storm broke I despaired; I thought it was the end. Heaven would not be so ironical as to hold the cup of love to our lips and then turn it to a cup of death."

"How long do you think the storm will last, Terry?" asked the girl after a little while.

"I don't know! A day, two days, possibly three.

The heavy snow comes a little later, as a rule; but this year the winter is weeks ahead of schedule. I have known the heavy fall last for a week."

"A week! If it lasts a week now, this cosy place will be our grave, and the snow our winding-sheet."

"No!" he answered. "We have the tea; and we have fire. If we can keep warm we can fight against hunger—and we must. The best thing will be to sleep. That way, the hours pass the quickest, and there is the least drain on the vitality."

"Then I will sleep now! And when you waken me I will watch the fire."

They relapsed into silence. Once or twice the girl opened her eyes and looked at him, the last time drowsily; and a little time after he knew that she was sleeping. With her in his arms, the warmth of their two bodies aided by the snow shelter, which retained the heat of the fire, defying the cold, he sat there, until the fire needed replenishing, then he gently laid her down, and threw the skin wrap over her.

Having made up the fire, he realized that day was declining, and as before nightfall there was one task that was imperative, he proceeded to fulfil it. Taking

the axe, and leaving the shelter, he hunted in the thicket until he found dead wood which he proceeded to fell and cut into lengths that he could carry to the camp. He made several journeys, beaten by the wind and the driving snow, and when darkness overtook him he was utterly exhausted; but inside the shelter there was a considerable pile of dead wood. He made up the fire, drank what was left of the strong black tea in the kettle in the embers, and then creeping back to his place under the rabbit-skin covering, slipped his arm round the still sleeping girl, and fell into the sleep of exhaustion.

Four hours later he was awakened by Mollie getting up to replenish the fire. The storm still raged through the thicket, and piling itself up on the windward side in a great drift, that offered greater protection to himself and the girl, as he marked with gladness. As Mollie crept back under the wrap, a piece of dry wood crackled into flame, lighting up the shelter, and she saw that he was awake.

"Terry," she said accusingly, "you have been out of the camp again."

"Yes, whilst you slept," he replied, "for sticks. We cannot afford to run out of firing, situated as we are. It was necessary."

"But you must not go again, without first awakening me. Promise—or I shall not dare to sleep."

"Nonsense, my dear, I wouldn't think of disturbing you just because I want to cut a little firewood."

"Promise," she said again, urgently. "Remember that now, we are—are partners!"

"Partners! Yes," he whispered in her ear. "And if it pleases you I will promise."

"Thank you, Terry. I know you will think I am foolish; but now I cannot bear the thought of separation from you. I am afraid of something happening."

" Nothing shall happen to either of us, without the other," he said soothingly.

" No ! With you I do not care, but without you I think I should be quite overcome." She was silent for a little while, then she said suddenly, " I wonder what time it is, Terry."

" About nine o'clock," he answered.

" Only that ? Then there are hours to pass before we shall have lived through the first day here ? "

" Yes ! " he answered. " Better go to sleep again, Mollie."

" I'll try, dearest. Kiss me good night."

He kissed her, and she snuggled in his arms contentedly, and presently slept once more, and after a little time Clancy also slept.

For three days the storm raged, piling up the snow round the shelter till it looked like a fantastic-shaped igloo ; and with each day it became a more perfect shelter, as if the storm in excess of fury were defeating its own purpose of destruction. Three times Clancy dug his way out of the shelter to gather wood, and after each time lay down by the girl's side, more exhausted than on the previous occasion. The little food they had scarcely sufficed to keep the flame of life alight within them, though the hot tea, generously sweetened, served to whip up their waning vitality.

Most of the time the girl was in a somnolent condition, and for that Clancy was thankful, since that way she was spared the pangs of hunger which assailed himself. After the first long sleep, which with intervals of wakefulness lasted well into the day following that in which they had been driven to shelter, he himself could not sleep, except for short periods, much troubled by dreams in which he feasted royally, and from which he awoke to the stark realities of starvation. As the storm raged on into the third day ; he

began to lose the inspiration which Mollie Elkington's love had brought. Hopefulness sank to zero, and when the girl in one of her brief intervals of wakefulness suggested again with wonderful calmness that they must die and find sepulture in the shelter where they lay, though he repudiated the thought openly, secretly he shared her conviction.

Some time in the fourth night he wakened to find that the wind no longer shrieked through the poplars; and through the open space overhead he caught the frosty gleam of stars. The storm, as he knew, was over; but he made no attempt to rise. There was, as he recognized, no end to be gained by doing so. He was warm and comfortable, and it would be folly to waste his steadily waning strength by climbing out of the shelter into the bitter cold of the open without any special reason for doing so. From the position where he lay without rising, he threw two or three heavy sticks upon the fire, watched the smoke curl upward, obliterating the stars, and then once more slipped into sleep.

This time his period of sleep was longer, and he awoke in daylight with the barking of a fox in his ears. He listened carefully to make sure that the sound did not belong to the realm of dreams; then awakening the girl, he whispered to her his purpose, and taking his rifle and snow-shoes, slipped out of the shelter, on the food trail, for even a fox spelled life to famishing humans.

He reconnoitred carefully. The fox was not in sight, but the sound seemed to come from the other side of the thicket, and slipping on his snow-shoes he began to move in that direction. His head swam with weakness, and he swayed drunkenly as he moved, scarcely able to lift the webbed-shoe from the level of depression made by each step to the height of the

untrodden snow ; whilst the black specks danced before his eyes as riotously as dust motes in a sunbeam.

Suddenly in the snow he came upon the fox trail, and then upon that of a ptarmigan, and a little farther on he found the place where the fox had made his kill. The whole story was written there quite plainly in the newly fallen snow, but the trail went on and the fox was not to be seen. Reeling and stumbling he followed the trail to the very edge of the thicket, and there he paused, looking out on the open towards the stretch of woods on the farther side.

The specks before his eyes whirled worse than snow-flakes in a blustering wind, his dizziness as he came to the halt was worse than when he had been on the move ; and the snowy world in front of him wavered and flickered before his eyes as if he were viewing it through the heat of summer. Then his head grew steadier, his vision cleared a little, and as he looked round for the ranging fox or anything else that would serve for meat, he became aware of a little cloud of white mist which seemed to rise from the snow not five hundred yards from where he stood.

As he saw it the blood surged in his head. He gave a gasp and silently dropped into the snow. For a moment he lay without moving. Then cautiously he lifted his head. The mist was still there, and now it seemed to have moved towards him ; whilst through the frost mist, in spite of the black specks which still danced in front of him, he discerned vague forms.

Slipping his hand from the mitten, he lifted it carefully, to test the wind. What little breeze there was set from the barren towards him, and reassured he lay quite still, more than half-buried in the snow, the new hope that had come to him making his heart beat painfully.

Suddenly something happened, what he never quite

knew. Probably some scent borne on the slightly moving air reached the game, but in front of him there was a sudden surge forward, a clacking of hoofs and out of the mist which hung about them appeared a small herd of caribou, trotting straight towards him. Holding himself well in hand, he waited. The meat was in sight, almost within his grasp; but a single movement now would lose it; and in his weakened condition, with the black specks dancing in myriads before his eyes, he dared not risk anything but a close shot.

Onward the caribou came, heads high, muzzles up, antlers back on the shoulders, the wide hoofs clacking. Before and behind them flew the snow, whilst the breath blowing from their nostrils was instantly frozen. Lying there Clancy had a thought that they would charge straight on him; but when sixty or seventy yards away the leader checked suddenly, the others bunched behind him and there was a second or two wild plunging, during which Clancy held himself in hand, waiting for the beasts to string out. They did so quickly, and as their flanks were presented to him, he selected his mark, sighted carefully, and then with a prayer upon his lips, held his breath and pressed the trigger. The beast at which he fired, leaped, plunged deep in the snow, and lifted itself again. But before it could follow its fellows, Clancy had ejected the empty shell, reloaded and fired again, and as the bull collapsed into the snow, he gave a weak yell of exultation, and rising to his feet, began to stumble towards the fallen creature whose death meant meat and life for Mollie Elkington and himself.

He reeled as he made his way in the deep snow. His breath came in gasps, and though he did not know it when he stood over the dead bull he sobbed with

relief and thankfulness. Here was salvation from the shadows of death that had dogged them for days, salvation that meant life and all the joy of the love that had been born in shadow. As he stood there, considering, he heard a weak shout behind him, and looking up saw Mollie stumbling towards him. He shouted back and waved his hand exultantly, and as the girl reached him, he cried, "Meat! Meat at last!"

Mollie gave one look at the poor beast lying in the snow, then she gave a sob, and fell into his arms.

"Oh, thank God!" she whispered. "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XXII

OUT OF THE NIGHT

TWO hours later, already conscious of returning strength, Clancy and the girl sat discussing the future.

"We have meat that will last us a long time," said the corporal, "but we have little else; and with meat alone there is always the risk of scurvy. We shall have to make for the nearest post as quickly as we can."

"My father——" began Mollie, and then checked herself.

Clancy, who had not forgotten Mr. Elkington, pointed to the wilderness of snow. "The trail is wiped out. It is one chance in a million that we shall ever stumble upon it again. The old trail lies under four feet of snow; and the new one—where shall we begin to look for it? It is not as if we knew that the sled team was making for some definite point in the landscape. I am convinced that the contrary is the fact. A madman drives those dogs;

and the meanderings of the trail, when we were following it, showed that he was merely wandering from point to point, without any set purpose to guide him. He certainly was not making for those twin hills that we ourselves had set out for, because we left those behind us when we followed in pursuit. I do not see that we can do anything else but give up the quest, my dear. The circumstances permit of no other course."

"No!" said the girl doubtfully. "No!"

"If we stumble on the trail again, that would be a different matter," continued Clancy. "Then we might follow, though frankly even then if the trail were likely to be a long one, I do not think I should feel justified in permitting you to follow it."

"I would not turn from it."

"No! I know you wouldn't, Mollie dear. But all the same, to follow might be the merest folly! I do not say that we should not take the risks. I simply say that it would not be wise to do so, ill-equipped as we are. As it is, before we are through we shall be tired and tried out to the last ounce that is in us, and have all we want before the end. I lived once for a month on straight moose-meat; and I know what we're up against. This caribou meat to-day has the sweetness of honey from the comb, but in a week—well, in a week we shall have grown to loathe it; and yet we shall have to keep on eating it three times a day as long as it lasts; or until we reach a post. In such circumstances we simply can't start to wander across the landscape looking for a trail that may not exist. That would be mere lunacy."

Mollie Elkington was silent for a little time. She knew that her lover spoke the truth; but her heart smote her at the thought of leaving the wilderness and seeking safety without any knowledge of her father's fate. She would be in the position of her

lover who ten years after his father's disappearance still sought news of him. She might find safety, life; but through the years she would be haunted by the thought that she had deserted her father, when taking risks she might have saved him. And yet reason told her that her lover was right; that the one way was to make for safety whilst that was possible to them. And there was her lover to consider. His life was as precious to her as her father's, and—— Her thought broke off sharply at that, and she asked abruptly, "What do you suggest, Terry?"

"Well," he replied. "I suggest that we make for old Fort Malsun, which must lie somewhere to the south-west of us. Just now, though I have examined the map carefully, I don't quite make out where we are. There's a chain of barrens, marked in the district where we undoubtedly are at this moment; but at what link of the chain we stand, I don't know. Anyway I calculate that to Malsun must be all three hundred miles, and it's the nearest point that we can make for. There's a H.B.C. store there, and the factor has a wife, a motherly Scotchwoman from Inverary. If we make the fort, she will look after you; and I can get dogs and stores and pick up an Indian guide, and start out to look for Mr. Elkington."

Again Mollie Elkington considered, and at last she nodded.

"It seems the only way, unless we encounter that sled *en route*."

"I'm afraid there is but small chance of that," answered Clancy quietly, "but of course one never knows."

"When shall we start? At once?"

"No, not for a couple of days. We're in no condition to start a long trail carrying the amount that we shall require to. We could do with the sled that

we abandoned now ; but not having it we shall have to pack the meat. If we remain here for that length of time, we shall feel the benefit of the food ; and we shall be able to bear greater burdens when we start."

"Do you think we shall have more snow ? "

"No ! Not at present, at any rate. It's too cold, and this last fall must have mopped out all the moisture from the air. We may have weeks without snow now."

They passed most of the day resting, and, as the light began to fade, once more prepared camp for the night. Clancy himself, delivered from despair, notwithstanding the risks and toils of the journey in prospect, was cheerful enough ; but now and again he surprised a look of gloom upon the girl's face ; and once towards dusk, when he returned from cutting wood, he missed her from the camp, and following her trail found her standing at the edge of the poplars, staring with troubled eyes across the snow-covered barren. Putting an arm about her he kissed her, and then whispered :

"Don't worry, Mollie ! "

"If I only knew what had happened to my father," she said in a quivering voice.

"I know," he answered quietly. "Remember that for ten years I have been troubled the same way."

"And my father could tell you what you want to know. He knows the whole story, though he has never told me. A little I know——"

"Tell me that," he said, a sudden tenseness in his voice. "I should like to know even the little you can tell me, Mollie."

But the girl shook her head. "No, my dear, no ! I do not know everything, and I might do an injustice to—to some one. Besides, it is a story that my father ought to tell you, that he wished he had told

you after you had left our camp that night, and I must leave it to him to unfold your mystery for you." She broke off, stared for a moment through the gathering dusk, then she cried, "You must not blame me, Terry. I have a superstitious feeling that, if I tell you, you will never hear the story from my father. And I want you—I mean, I want him to tell you."

In his turn Clancy stared out towards the waste, watched the deepening dusk, and thought how remote the chances were that he would ever hear the story from Mr. Elkington's lips. He did not utter his thought, however, for he would not for worlds have added to the burden of apprehension which she already carried.

"Very well, Mollie, I will wait until your father can tell me the whole story. I have waited so long that a little while longer cannot matter."

The girl made no reply, and together they stood there with the Arctic night gathering round them—a ghostly gloom by reason of the snow, and, since there was no wind, as still as the grave. A tuning-fork might have been heard a score of yards away, a shout a mile off, a rifle-shot twice that distance. And suddenly on that intense stillness came a long-drawn howl. The sound was reduplicated many times, and the girl shivered and crept closer to her lover.

"Wolves," he said in explanation. "They are on the meat-trail—moose or caribou, I expect."

Scarcely had the explanation crossed his lips, when far away there sounded the faint crack of a rifle.

"Great heavens!" whispered Clancy. "You heard that, Mollie?"

"I heard something," she said; "it sounded like the report of a rifle."

"That is just what it was," he answered. "It was across the barren there in the timber."

"But who can it be?" asked Mollie, her eyes ablaze with eagerness, the blood running in her face in a red tide.

"I do not know," began Clancy. "But—There again another rifle-shot, and by the sound the tide of battle runs this way."

"Yes!" said the girl. "Yes! Oh, Terence, if it should be—the sled—"

That thought had leaped in Clancy's mind at the sound of the first shot; but he made haste to discourage it in the girl.

"Hardly likely," he said. "Probably some trapper, or Indian or Eskimo who— Again! One! two! three times. Whoever it is he is evidently pretty hard beset or he wouldn't waste ammunition at such a rate. I must get my rifle."

He hurried back to the camp, the girl accompanying him, and secured his rifle, then he returned to his vantage point, and with Mollie by his side, paced to and fro, to and fro, in a fever of impatient expectation. Nothing happened, however, and no further sound reached them. As the darkness gathered the stars came out, but stare as he would across the dim waste of snow, Clancy could see nothing moving. For a full half-hour he waited and watched, straining ears and eyes, but all in vain. Nothing of note manifested itself; and both the rifle and the wolves were silent. At last Clancy turned to the girl.

"No need to waste any more time here, Mollie. We had better return to the camp."

"What do you think has happened?" asked the girl in a whisper. "Have the wolves killed the—"

"I should say it was very unlikely," interrupted Clancy, understanding what was in her mind. "Ex-

cept when they are mad with hunger they seldom attack men, particularly men with guns. If they had got the man who fired, we should have heard the clamour and howling wrangle they would make over the kill. What I expect has happened is that the traveller, whoever he was, has been driven to camp, and the wolves have drawn off."

"Then there is someone quite close to us, Terry?"

"So it would seem, my dear! But you must not build upon it. It is very much more likely to be some Indian or trapper than the men whom we have been following. Remember it is four days since we lost the trail."

"Yes! But they must have been driven to camp as we were."

"That of course is true, but it is equally certain that on the first opportunity they resumed their journey; and probably left their camp as soon as the storm ceased, which it did in the night. In any case, unless we hear more, we can do nothing. We can't start out in the darkness to look for a problematic traveller, who has been forced to shoot a few wolves, and who is probably well able to look after himself. In the morning it will be different. Then we may be able to locate him, as I hope we shall, for we may possibly secure stores of the kind we need."

As he finished speaking, he stared earnestly into the darkness, and Mollie asked quickly, "What is it? Do you see anything, Terry?"

"No. I was looking for the gleam of the traveller's fire, that is all. In the ordinary course of things any man, unless he was almost at the end of a trail, would be making camp at this hour."

"Or unless, like those men we were following, he preferred to travel at night."

"Few men will do that, I imagine," answered Clancy, still searching the darkness. At last he turned, "Come, my dear, nothing is going to happen now, and we shall be better by the fire."

Reluctantly, Mollie Elkington turned towards the camp. The sounds that had reached them had quickened to new life a hope that was almost dead within her, the hope that, in spite of the vast spaces amid which they moved, she might yet encounter her father. In Clancy himself the same hope had been stirred; but in talking to the girl he had carefully discounted it, lest false hopes should be raised. An hour later, when Mollie Elkington was sleeping soundly, he crept silently out of the camp, and carrying his rifle went once more to the edge of the poplars. Standing there, he stared steadily across the waste in the direction of the woods. He could see nothing, hear nothing; but he did not return to the camp. Instead he began to walk briskly round the outer edge of the poplars, stopping occasionally to listen, and, as he reached various vantage points, to stare across the waste. He made the complete circuit without seeing any gleam of fire, and without hearing anything beyond the crunch of his snow-shoes on the hardening snow.

When he arrived again at his starting point the hope that had brought him forth was almost dead, for in the utter stillness had anyone been on trail within a reasonable distance he must have heard them; whilst in the darkness a camp-fire must have betrayed the presence of any traveller or travellers. He took one more look at the semicircle of darkness in front of him, and then turned on his heel to return to the camp.

Just as he did so a faint sound reached him, swinging him round with incredible swiftness, for, as his practised ear told it was the short, sharp yelp of a

dog when it is struck by the whip. There was some one out there in the darkness following the trail by night, after all. As he looked over the snow, he was conscious of a thrill.

The team travelling in the darkness was almost certainly that which he and Mollie had followed at such risk to themselves ; and it was possible that the madman who drove it had doubled back on the trail.

The sound that had reached him had come from a distance, and it had been impossible for him to locate the precise direction. But now, alert and eager, he waited for any repetition of it. The moments went by without any violation of the terrific silence, yet he waited patiently. Then, suddenly, once more the sound reached him, the sharp yelp of a dog as it feels the lash, and on the heels of it a rumbling sound, altogether inarticulate, which he guessed came from the lips of some swearing driver.

The sounds were distinctly nearer, though as yet he could see nothing, and it was only with an effort that he was able to restrain himself from moving from the thicket into the open in the attempt to discover the team and its driver. But knowing that there was the possibility of a supreme effort being required of him, and that in his weakened condition he could not afford to dissipate energy in useless walking, he remained where he was, every sense alert, eyes searching the dimness, ears open to gather every sound that might come to them. Once more he caught a yelp ; and just as he located the direction of it, shadows loomed vaguely in the dimness ; and at the same moment the sound of a babbling voice reached him, and his heart gave a great leap.

He had now no doubt that the oncoming team was the one the trail of which had led himself and the girl to almost complete disaster. By some providential

chance, it had swung round in its tracks and was now moving straight towards him. In a few minutes, if it kept its present course, the secret of its mad driver would be made clear, and the fate of Mr. Elkington also. With excitement mounting to fever pitch, he had much ado to restrain himself from anticipating events and going forth to meet the oncoming team; but with a supreme effort of will he remained where he was. He had a feeling that for the moment events had passed out of his hands; that he needed to do nothing, since fate, so long adverse, was now throwing the game to his hands, and that all he needed to do was to wait.

On drove the sledge. He could see the team quite plainly now, and could make out the forms of two men, one breaking trail in front, the other following behind. Then quite suddenly out of the dumbness came a voice that shrieked with fear.

"Non! Anton, Non!"

The cry was blood-curdling in its quality of mortal fear, but he recognized the voice instantly.

"Jean Dubosc," he whispered, and slipping his hand from his mitten, he threw off the safety catch of the rifle.

The cry was followed by the crack of a whip and that by a chorus of yelps from the beaten dogs, and then, when not a dozen yards from the poplars, the trail-breaker swerved as if to alter the course. In that same moment Clancy acted, running forward to intercept the team.

"Hands up, Jean Dubosc!"

The hail was answered by a maniacal shout, and a burst of blood-curdling laughter, and close after sounded a voice madly imploring. "Stop the fiend, for God's sake!"

The voice was that of John B. Elkington, and as he recognized it, Clancy dropped to one knee. At all

costs he must stop that team, and there was but one safe way to do it. Sighting the leading dog, less than a dozen yards away, he fired. The dog yelped once, leaping, and then fell in its traces. Its companions overrunning it were in a moment in the wildest tangle, and as, cursing and screaming, the trail-breaker turned on them with a whip, the confusion grew more confounded.

To the dogs, nor to the man behind the sled, who seemed strangely unequal to the situation, Clancy gave no heed. Running forward he reached Dubosc, who, with a maniacal shriek, turned on him with the whip. But the corporal got his blow in first, the blow of a clubbed rifle, and Dubosc went down like a log, right into the tangle of dogs. Instantly Clancy sprang forward, and jerked him clear, then called out to Mr. Elkington.

"Over with the sledge, quick. Anchor the brutes!"

"I can't," came the answering cry. "I——"

The corporal did not hear the end. Jumping forward, he heaved the sled over, and then ran to Mr. Elkington.

"I'm bound," cried the American in a voice that had a break in it. "That maniac there——"

Clancy did not wait for him to finish. Drawing his knife he cut the hide thongs which bound Elkington's arms to his sides; and cut the other thongs by which he was attached to the sled; then he thrust the rifle into the American's hands.

"Keep an eye on Dubosc, whilst I straighten out the dog tangle."

The latter promised to be no easy task. The four remaining dogs were rolling over each other, a snarling, yelping, furry heap; but picking up the unconscious Dubosc's dog-whip, Clancy waded into the tangle fear-

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lessly, and in a few minutes had the dogs lying in the snow, snarling but quiescent. At that moment he heard a cry.

"Terry! Terry!"

He swung round to see Mollie, snowshoeless, plunging across the space between the last of the poplars and the sled. He hurried forward to meet her, and she began a hurried question.

"Oh, Terry, what——"

He gathered her up in his arms, and without replying to the question, carried her to Mr. Elkington, who, with Jean Dubosc beginning to move, was torn between his task and the great hope which had surged within him. When close to her father, Clancy set the girl on her feet.

"There!" he cried. "There's your answer!"

Snatching the rifle, he turned to Dubosc, who was trying to rise. Quite callously the corporal dropped the rifle-butt upon the half-breed's head, and as the latter once more dropped into the snow, running to the sled, Clancy secured some of the thongs that he had cut from Mr. Elkington, and proceeded to bind his captive, conscious all the time of the sobbing, but joyful, explanations the girl was making to her father.

When he had secured Dubosc, he righted the sled, and lifted the half-breed on to it. Then he called out, "I'm going to the camp. You two had better come along also."

He faced the dogs, gave a word that brought them to their feet, then he cried, "Moosh! Moosh!" and recognizing their new master, the dogs moved forward, leaving their dead leader in the snow.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF THE TRAIL

HALF an hour afterwards, standing in the shelter, with the dogs tethered outside, and with Dubosc bound in a blanket, staring with mad eyes into the fire, and babbling to himself, Clancy faced Mr. Elkington.

"Clancy, I want to thank you for what you've done for my little girl. Mollie has told me something of what you've been through together, and I understand that she's going to make you my son-in-law?"

"Yes!" said the Corporal tersely.

"I'm glad of it! It will perhaps do something to right a ten-year-old wrong."

The corporal started at the words, and the older man, stretching a mittened hand, put it lightly on Clancy's shoulder. "Sit down, my son. We've got to have a good talk; and I reckon when we're through you won't blame me much."

Clancy sat down, and as he did so he noted that the other's face was gaunt and frost-bitten, and saw other signs that he had been through gruelling experiences.

"If you like to defer it, Mr. Elkington——"

"No! I'm going to get it off my chest one-time. I ought to have told you the story when you came to my camp on the lake that night; and I blame myself that I didn't, because it leaves my action open to a certain misinterpretation." He broke off, looked at Dubosc, whose babblings had temporarily ceased, then he said, "I understand you have been inclined to blame me for the disappearance of your father, ten years ago."

Clancy nodded. "The morning after I visited your camp, Dubosc there told me a story which impli-

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cated you, and which, taken in conjunction with certain knowledge you had shown, seemed like conclusive proof that you were my father's old partner."

"And I wasn't; though I happen to be his brother."

"His brother?"

"Yes! I had a brother who was just plain Benedict Elkington, whilst I am John Benedict. This brother of mine was up here in the rush that followed the Klondyke discovery; and, as I discovered two years ago, he was the partner of Sir Terence Clancy, who——"

"What became of my father?" broke in the young man.

"I was coming to that, but I'll make a jump to it. He was lost in the great woods one day when he and my brother were returning after making a wonderful strike of gold. They were almost out of grub, and both of them had gone out of camp to hunt for game. My brother returned to find that Sir Terence was still absent. He waited all the day, and still Sir Terence did not return. In the night Benedict heard the sound of firing, and guessed that his partner was lost, and was making signals in the hope of getting replies that would help him to locate the camp. Benedict heard them quite plainly, but——"

"He did not reply?" cried Clancy, as the other paused.

"No! He was in the grip of temptation. Behind him in the North was a lode of gold that would make them both millionaires; but—he did not reply immediately; because covetousness had entered into his soul. The next morning Sir Terence had not returned, and my brother struck camp and hurried southward; but two days later, smitten with remorse, he returned on his trail and did what he could. It was little enough. He found his old camp all right, but though he searched

the woods for three days, he found nothing of your father. He fired his rifle continually without reply ; and then made the rather terrible discovery that he had fired his last shot. His own position was now a pretty bad one. He was left with practically no provisions, and without the means of procuring meat that the rifle would have afforded him ; and there were some three hundred miles between himself and the nearest camp of Lone Moose.

" Recognizing that his own position was little better than that of his lost partner, in a panic of fear he fled down the trail once more. What he passed through, what he endured, and how he survived, I won't stop to tell you now. It is all written down in a little diary that you shall one day read, if we get out of this."

" We're going to get out of this—now ! " commented Clancy.

" Yes, I believe you, though an hour ago I hadn't a hope. But, to continue, after weeks of privation he reached Lone Moose camp, a broken man ! He made his way somehow to New York, and when he got there, his mind was gone. He babbled to me about a great strike of gold, but I didn't believe him——"

" The gold is there ! My father's last letter testified to that."

" Yes ! But if you'd talked to a man who was close to the border-line of insanity, and had had nothing but his bare word, you'd have doubted, as I did. And within a month after his return he was clean insane. He began to talk then about your father, and little by little I got the whole story ; but what was true and what the wild imaginings of a man whose mind was gone, I could not estimate, and I never tried, because before long it became necessary to

send him to a sanatorium for mental cases. He lived there something over seven years treasuring always two things; one the little diary that I mentioned just now; and the other a parchment chart——”

“Of the place of the gold, I suppose.”

“Yes! No one worried about them. He wasn’t likely to do himself or anyone else any harm with them, and he was allowed to keep them through all those years; but when he died, they came to me; and it was whilst I was glancing them over one night, I was struck suddenly by the thought that after all there might be something in Benedict’s madness. I started to read the diary at the beginning, and before I was at the end, my soul was ravaged by what my brother had gone through in the way of remorse. I knew long before I had reached the end, that there was more in the business than I had ever dreamed; and when I looked at the chart I was convinced, for that was not Benedict’s hand, and so could not be the product of his lunacy.

“I then and there resolved that, when the opportunity arose, I would put the thing to the test by trying to locate the place. Nearly two years elapsed before my business affairs could be so arranged as to permit of my absenting myself for a long period. But at last the day came and I started up here, bringing with me my daughter to whom I had told a little of the story, and who was just wild to engage in a real treasure hunt.”

John B. Elkington was silent for a moment, and then he resumed. “When Mollie brought you to our camp, it was a very startling surprise for me. I was just a little knocked out, and as one is reluctant to drag his family skeletons into light, when I heard your story, I temporized by trying to dissuade you from your hopeless search, and by persuading you

to become my partner in this affair, which was the very least that I could do."

"Of course, I couldn't foresee what was going to happen, and equally of course if I had had more time for reflection I should have told you the whole story; though now I'll own that I'm glad I didn't."

"You are glad?"

"Yes, Clancy, glad. I reckon it was a providential thing, for if I'd told you then you'd probably have gone your way afterwards, and you wouldn't have dragged Dubosc after me, as I gather from Mollie you did; and if you hadn't, where would Mollie and I have been with two treacherous scoundrels like Montana and Anton, who had some wind of the treasure through my name? But for you we should by this hour have been dead and——"

"Where is Anton?" interrupted Clancy quickly.

"I don't know. I only know that he's dead, and from the ravings of that madman there I gather that he killed Anton, whilst I was unconscious. The hair-raising time I've had these last few days! Dubosc there thinks that Anton's ghost haunts him; and that as soon as it is dark, it comes to sit behind him and stare at him. I came out of unconsciousness to discover that; and since then I've come precious near to being distraught myself, what between anxiety for Mollie and the horror of being a prisoner in the hands of a sheer lunatic. I said 'precious near,' but the truth is that there was one day when I believe I dipped the balance altogether; I know that in the middle of a snow-storm, I came to myself shouting mad things, and that I was pretty well scared of myself. I tried twice to get away from Dubosc, but he was as cunning as a fox. In all his ravings he never forgot me; and in the daytime when we camped he tied me up; and at night when we travelled in order to

escape the attentions of the ghostly Anton, at first he bound me to the sled ; and then, when I was able to move, he fastened me behind in the fashion you saw ; and so for days we've been racing about the countryside, without so much as the ghost of a notion where we were going. It has been a frightful business, I tell you, and just now when you encountered us, I was in the very depths of despair. I felt I couldn't keep going much longer ; and I knew that if I went down, the madman would drag me at the tail-end of the sled rather than stop. When you hailed him, I didn't know who you were ; but you were like a great angel of light to me."

He broke off, and waited a moment as if expecting some comment, then he added quietly ; " You've heard the story, Clancy. I hope you don't blame me overmuch ? "

For one fleeting second Clancy seemed to hesitate ; but it was only that he might look at Mollie Elkington ; and when he met her eyes with the lovelight shining in their depths, he answered from his heart.

" Not in the least, Mr. Elkington ! "

" Then shake hands, boy. "

They shook hands heartily, and after a little time the older man asked : " What are we going to do now, my son ? "

The corporal looked at Dubosc, who for the moment had sunk into somnolence, then he replied, " It's my first duty to get that murderer down to the post. "

" And after ? "

" Well, " replied Clancy, " My second will be to buy myself out of the police ; for it will be years before I should earn sufficient there to—to—— "

" Keep Lady Clancy in a state that becomes her, hey ? "

Clancy laughed. " Well, when I joined the force

I hadn't any notion of there ever being a Lady Clancy to support."

"No, I guess not. One dollar twenty-five a day doesn't run to the contemplation of matrimony," answered the other, laughing with him. "And after—again?"

"Then I think I shall avail myself of the partnership you were good enough to offer me, sir, and come up here after that gold which undoubtedly exists."

"Partnership! The gold's yours more than it is mine, boy! I'll stand in as sleeping partner if you like, and find the necessary dollars; but you won't get me on this side the Arctic Circle again, if I can help it."

Clancy laughed. "An arrangement of that sort will do very well for me. You find the money for development, and I'll find the gold, which my father found before me. And in two years I shall be in a position to ask Mollie to——"

"Two years!"

John B. Elkington laughed at something which was not clear to Clancy at the time, but which became clear when they arrived at Old Fort Malsun on the southward journey. There, whilst they were resting a couple of days, Père Molineau, a missionary priest of famous name in the North, arrived; and after a joyous dinner, in the course of which the priest had told many stories grim and gay and adventurous, John B. Elkington asked suddenly; "Père Molineau, what's the biggest fee you ever had for a wedding?"

"Twenty-five dollars," answered the priest with a laugh. "But why do you ask?"

"Because I've a mind to pay you one of a thousand, right now!"

For a moment Père Molineau's merry face wore a puzzled look, then he caught sight of Mollie Elking-

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ton's face in which the warm blood was vivid ; and looking from her to the corporal, whose lean face indexed mingled embarrassment and anticipation, the jolly priest laughed his understanding.

"Monsieur, I would much like to earn so great a fee. My mission on the river is a very sponge that soaks up dollars as other sponges soak up water."

Elkington laughed. "From what you have said here to-night it's a sponge that deserves plenty of fluid to soak in, and—well—I'd like you to have that thousand dollars."

He glanced humorously at his daughter's scarlet face, and from her to the corporal.

"I don't know the rules of your service, Terence," he said suggestively, "but—well now, you've heard Father Molineau. Don't you think that he deserves that thousand dollars?"

"For so great a fee," said the priest smilingly, "even the rules of the Mounted Police may be broken, my son ; and for so charming a young lady, even I myself might venture to break a rule."

Clancy laughed to hide his embarrassment and quoted the only rule he could remember that had any bearing upon the matter. "Married men will not be engaged."

"And engaged men will not be married, hey ? A clear case for taking the law into one's own hands, particularly as you're coming out. You can leave it to me to explain to your inspector——"

"And if you don't, I will not the task take to explain to your charming lady, why I should be denied so great a fee. Non !"

Clancy looked at Mollie, and saw a glint of laughter in her eye. Then suddenly he laughed himself.

"Then I will not rob you, Père Molineau. Tomorrow you shall earn your 'so great a fee'."

And on the morrow, as it chanced, Père Molineau more than earned it; for when he was making out the certificate and the corporal gave his name and state, the good priest suddenly checked his writing.

"Terence Clancy, Baronet! *Tiens!* I remember. Long ago I did write to you about your father, surely?"

"About my father!" cried Clancy. "I have had no letter about my father from you."

"But I did one write, ten years ago!"

Clancy stared bewilderingly. "I have never heard from you in my life, father. Nor since my father was lost——"

"He was lost, but I found him, my son. I took him to my mission on the river, for he was very weak and nigh to death. I heard his confession, and when he died I buried him with my own hands, and set a little cross above him. Also I wrote——" He checked himself suddenly. "Now I remember! That year a mail-sled was lost in the river, and the mail-carrier also. *Tiens!* that I should forget! I grow old. But I did write! But in so great a matter I ought again to have written. It was a great neglect of my duty, for which I beg forgiveness."

Clancy looked at the bowed head of the priest, who clearly was distressed at what he conceived a fault, then greatly moved he spoke. "There can be no question of forgiveness, Père Molineau. From the hands that blessed my father, rather should I ask a blessing, and one day I will come to your mission on the river and you shall show me my father's grave."

"That will I, my son! And you will be very welcome."

And when, that same night, Terence Clancy and his bride stood outside the old stockade of the fort watching the flashing of the aurora above their heads, Mollie suddenly made her first request of her husband.

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